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THE MAGAZINE O

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV
The Rocketing Dutchman

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by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

Polly Charms, The Sleeping Woman
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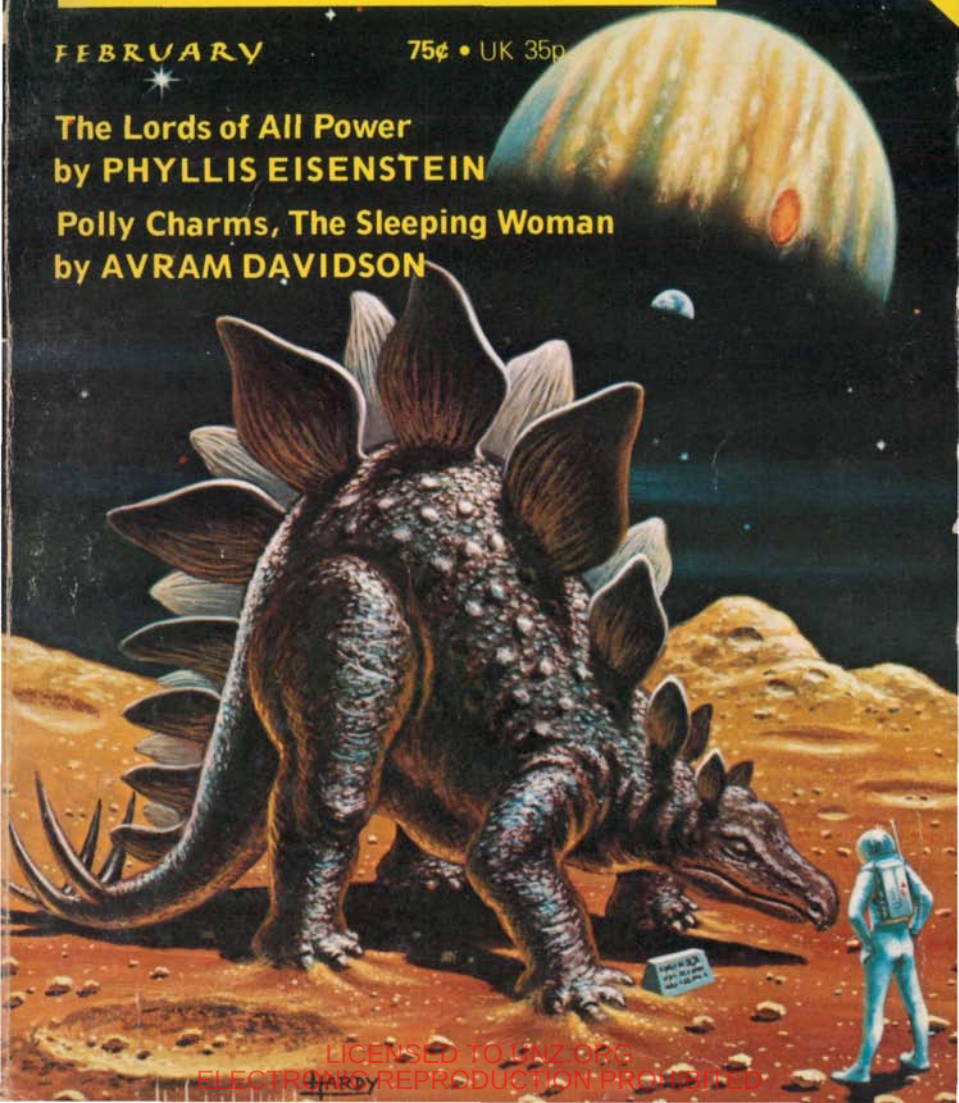

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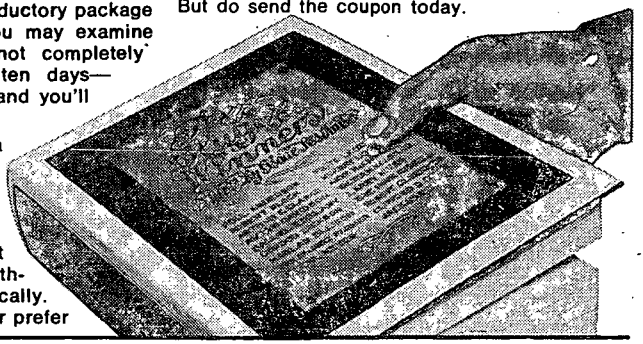

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Editorial

Effective with next month's issue, March 1975, the newsstand price of F&SF will increase to $.95; the new one-year subscription rate will be $10.00.

We are well aware that this is a fairly significant increase, especially for younger readers and students, who presumably do not have the compensation of a rising income. However, it has become necessary because of the following factors:

1. This is our first price increase since 1971. In addition, we added 16 editorial pages in October 1972 without any increase in price.

2. Unlike the supermarket clerk (in the *New Yorker* cartoon) who, price marker in hand, races a shopper to the checkout counter, we cannot raise the price of a magazine in frequent increments of 1 or 2 cents.

3. As most of you know, F&SF is an independent magazine, not part of a larger publishing company. The magazine is edited and published from my home, has a small staff, and we have been able to keep administrative costs to a minimum. However, our three major expenses are paper, printing and postage, over which we have limited control, and this is what has happened to these costs in the last three years: Paper, up 89%. Printing, up 44%. Postage, up 82%. Obviously we cannot continue to absorb these kinds of increases, and now we must reluctantly pass on a portion of them to our readers.

We hope you understand the reasons for this decision and will stay with us in the months and years to come. We pledge to continue to bring to you the best in imaginative fiction and features at the lowest possible price.

— Edward L. Ferman

P.S. There is still time to subscribe at the present one-year rate of $8.50, saving $1.50 over the new rate and $2.90 over the new single copy price. Please use the coupon on page 134.

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This story concludes the vastly entertaining series about Alaric, a minstrel with exceptional powers. Earlier stories were "Born to Exile," August 1971; "Inn of the Black Swan," November 1972; and "The Witch and the Well," January 1974; however, it is not necessary to have read them to enjoy the tale below.

The Lords of All Power

by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

While yet a day's march away, Alaric the minstrel and his two companions sighted the castle. An imposing structure of crenelated walls and towers, it capped the highest hill in view and spread halfway down the slopes in three tiers of stone battlements. Impregnable was the first word that flashed through Alaric's mind. Except, of course, to such as he.

"There stands your father's capital," Artuva said, "just as it was seventeen years ago, just as it was before my father's father's time. Ten generations of Gārlenon, they say, have held this land." A tinge of pride crept into her voice. "And my kin have served here for seasons beyond number." Then she recollected her long exile, a fact that sometimes escaped her aging mind, and she spoke more softly: "But I suppose those days are gone forever." She looked at the ground and muttered to herself, clutching the stump of her left hand close to her withered bosom.

Mizella stroked the old woman's thin hair, a soothing gesture she had often made in their months of travel. "You have brought back the Baron's son; surely he will reward you for that."

Artuva glanced up sideways, her mouth all pinched together. She considered Mizella's statement for a moment. "He is a hard man, but fair. Perhaps there will be some reward. His grandsire rewarded me once with gold and jewels and a red house inside the Third Wall. But that was when I was young and beautiful like you, long before my crime." She shook her head. "Just let me be with my folk — that is reward enough."

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Alaric squinted against the setting sun. He could barely discern the city, a sprawl of low buildings at the foot of the hill, half hidden by intervening trees and rolling land. The smoke of many cooking fires hung above it, drifting slowly southward with the evening breeze.

"You'll see them tomorrow, if all goes well," he said. He looped Lightfoot's reins about a slender sapling, leaving enough slack that the horse might crop the fresh undergrowth. Though the season was full spring, Lightfoot's ribs still marked a winter of privation; his master had not dared steal enough grain to keep him well-fed. Yet he had carried two riders at once, through long days and miles with little sign of fatigue; he was bred a warhorse, bred to bear an armored man and his weapons, and two unencumbered bodies were a small load for him. He lowered his head and fed, ignoring the bustle of camp making that eddied around him.

Old Artuva set about gathering wood as Alaric vanished in search of provisions. She had quickly become accustomed to the young minstrel's private mode of travel, accepting its reality with a careful respect but no outward sign of fear. Unlike Mizella, she dismissed all belief in the Dark One, insisting that magical powers were merely another skill, like singing or weaving, that some people acquired easily and others could never master. In her country, she said, magic was a commonplace of life; fortune telling, spells, philters, the manufacture of luck charms — nearly everyone had a secret or two that he revealed only to his dearest children. Even the Baron, his subjects agreed, must practice some art that enabled him to vanquish his enemies, though whether spell, philter, foreknowledge, or charm, no one knew.

"Tribute comes to him from far beyond the horizon," she murmured, staring into the fire that Mizella tended — staring into the past. "Finely wrought ornaments of red gold and gems, gossamer cloth bordered in purple, richly carven furnishings of dark wood, well-matched teams of handsome horses. I saw a caravan once of strange, spindly legged animals, piled high with bags and baskets, driven by leather-skinned men who beat them with flails. The Baron himself came out to meet them at the gate of the Third Wall. And I thought to myself, he rules the whole world — towns beyond number, the people and their animals, the crops they raise and the ores they mine, the very air they breathe. The popping of a green twig brought her back to the present, and she looked up; Alaric

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had returned with a large round cheese and a fresh-baked loaf of bread which Mizella sliced for dinner.

"Where I come from," said Mizella, "we never heard of him." She passed the old woman a share of the food.

Artuva nodded. "I was only a child then. Later, I learned from elders, from travelers, how vast was the world and how small a corner of it my liege lord controlled. And yet ... I had to walk far indeed to obey his banishment. I no longer recall how many towns I passed that bore his black and scarlet emblem." She nibbled at her cheese, looking back over her shoulder at the castle, now a looming shadow on the darkening sky. "He has surely added more since then, for his House was ever victorious in battle. And ever desirous of new land."

Mizella made a sign to ward off evil. "Perhaps headman Harbet was not mistaken to decorate his village with guardian symbols."

"They will not help him if Garlenon wants it. His House is proof against magic. My father's cousin told a tale of the great sorcerer employed by one of the Baron's enemies, of the spells and charms he tried, of a waxen image he molded and slashed with silver blades. The sorcerer was slain, and his lord, too, but Garlenon suffered not at all."

Alaric glanced at Mizella, eyebrows raised. He had told her often, though never convinced her entirely, that ceremonial magic was a fraud. This story seemed new evidence for his view. "Harbet is probably safe enough because of sheer distance, not to mention the dearth of value in his village. A man bent on conquest could find far worthier prizes. The Baron must have a sizable army, eh?"

Artuva shrugged. "I do not know."

"What then? Does he march to war in dead of night when no one may see?"

The old woman shook her head. "I have seen him ride off with a small retinue and return triumphant. But I have never seen a large army."

"It must be garrisoned elsewhere. Surely he's taken your sons and brothers to fight his battles. Or hires mercenaries."

"Our men have never gone to war for him. He fights with magic; some say he conjures soldiers out of the earth — soldiers that disappear with the dawn. But I've never seen that. When my mother's mother was a child, the city was besieged by a force of ten thousand men. The Baron gathered the people within the Third Wall for three days; on the

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fourth, the enemy dispersed of their own accord, and the people went back to their homes. Many rumors arose after that: of swords that wielded themselves, of men driven to suicide by terrifying apparitions — but these were only speculation. From dusk to dawn for those three nights, a light burned in the high tower, the Baron's own apartments. What he did there, no man of the city knew, but it was enough. The House of Garlenon needs no army."

Alaric could imagine what had happened — the power of instantaneous travel was the well-guarded art of the Garlenons. He wondered how many of his relatives possessed it.

"What is he like?" Alaric said. "My father."

"Who? Oh, yes." Her eyes focused on him. "The Baron, your father. He is tall and dark, like you, though heavier in the body, and he wore a full black beard when last I saw him. He was some thirty years old then and had been baron for five or six of them. He was a fair man, a just man. He always treated me well, even at the last. He could have put me to death, but he's not like that, not like his grandsire. The *old* Baron had a man publicly flogged who refused him a daughter. The man was crippled, the daughter never seen again. Some said she ran off with a suitor, but a laundress I knew once claimed to see a red chemise embroidered with her name hanging in the courtyard — so it seemed she must serve the Baron's pleasure after all. Years passed, other women came and went, but *she* ... Yes, we wondered if he had killed her, though no one dared speak such words aloud. Her poor bones lying far from her family all for the foolishness of a father."

Mizella moved closer to Alaric, slipped her shoulders under his cloak. "The present Baron is different, you say."

"Oh, yes, quite different. At least, toward his own subjects. Toward his enemies, he is as ruthless as his ancestors were."

Alaric leaned back against the thick bole of an ancient oak, one arm cuddling Mizella's warmth to his side. His free hand plucked randomly at the strings of his new lute; after losing the old one to the cleansing fire of self-righteous witch haters, he had searched diligently for another as like it as possible. In a marketplace somewhere west of Durman's realm, he found an instrument of similar style ... battered and worn, missing pegs and strings and much of its varnish, the neck half cracked off. Pretending an idle interest, he convinced the merchant who owned it — no musician himself — that it was worthless

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except as a possible wall decoration. The merchant alleged that he discovered it under a fall of timbers in the ruins of a wealthy house, the last portable item of any value there, somehow overlooked by bandits and scavengers alike; it had cost him nothing and he was willing to sell it for a pittance. Alaric had no money but traded his spare shirt for the instrument. That night he carved fresh pegs from Lightfoot's stirrups, the only seasoned wood available. A few days later, at a more westerly market, he bartered the rest of the saddle for solvent, varnish, and glue, as well as costly new strings.

"You needn't sell the saddle," Mizella had chided. "I can soon earn enough by ... by plying my old trade."

"And I can cast the fortune sticks for passersby in the square," offered Artuva.

Alaric shook his head. "The lute is mine, the saddle is mine. I will not require you to rent out your body, Mizella, nor you to chance again the cry of witchcraft, good lady. If things go well, we can buy a new saddle someday. Till then, Lightfoot will move all the faster for being less encumbered."

"You could have sold the sword," Mizella whispered. She refrained from suggesting that he steal either money or materials, well aware of his distaste for theft beyond bare necessity. "The scabbard alone would fetch a greater price than the saddle."

"No, I'll not sell the sword."

The sword was the single memento left to him of a passage in his life that he wished never to forget, yet remembered too well. A woman far behind him: Solinde ... he hoped she sometimes looked westward from her tower to meditate on the fate of her minstrel. Her embroidered favor had perished in the flames with his lute — her favor, far more precious to him than the lute itself, though the lute was a relic of the days with Dall, his dead mentor. From Dall, he had a heart full of song; from Solinde's brother Jeris, a sword; from his beloved herself he had nothing but a memory.

A Baron's son, though, might dream of more ... and dream he did, as he traveled west to his father's domain.

"We are not his enemies," Alaric said to Artuva, and he smiled and thought of Solinde even as he held Mizella in his arms.

An early start brought them to the city walls by mid-afternoon. The city itself had spread far beyond the old stone ramparts; undefended shops and homes and streets of hard-packed earth demonstrated the security that Garlenon's people enjoyed. The shops were crowded with elegant

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goods, domestic and foreign — cloth of every color and degree of opacity, wines in gaily painted flagons and tinted glass decanters, intricate ornaments and prismatic gems, household utensils of polished metal and finely carved wood, fresh common foodstuffs and exotic preserves wholly unknown to Alaric. Shops and homes alike were not merely sturdy and serviceable but large and opulent, many boasting two and three doors, half a dozen windows, slatted shutters and sculpted lintels, walls of varicolored inlaid tile, and patios of neatly dressed stone. The people who hurried on their errands or lazed in open-air wine shops were attired like brilliant birds, bedecked with buttons, studs, and flashing trinkets, broad leather belts and square-toed, high-heeled, silver-buckled shoes. Even the horses sported trappings of every hue, plumes, and tassles twined in mane and tail. Alaric felt shabby as he passed among them, lacking even a clean shirt.

The three travelers walked, Mizella leading Lightfoot. "This city has never been sacked," she muttered. Her eyes were caught by the feminine finery on every side, and she brushed at her hair and tried to smooth the wrinkles in her dirty gown.

"Not since my mother's mother's time," said Artuva. "Lord Garlenon protects us well and rarely keeps all the tribute for himself. Come — the house of my kin lies just beyond the wall."

"After seventeen years," Mizella whispered aside to the minstrel, "I hope they are still there."

"Only she was banished," he replied softly. "And the Baron, she keeps saying, is a fair man. Would a fair man have punished an entire family for the crime of a single member?"

"Sometimes I wonder if she knows which Baron she speaks of — the present one, his father, or his grandfather. Her mind ..."

"If a newborn babe had vanished with your hand, perhaps your mind would also wander on occasion."

Artuva led them through the wide iron-banded gate. Beyond the wall, the city was older, the buildings more closely packed but no less elaborately decorated. Traffic was denser here on the main thoroughfare, and the newcomers had to march single-file, holding hands, dodging horses and oxcarts and wandering sweetmeat vendors whose sharp-cornered trays were almost as lethal as knives. Fortunately, the old woman soon turned into a narrower side street and then into a second, and the crush of people lessened considerably.

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"This is the Street of Four Blacksmiths," said Artuva. She gestured toward the second house from the corner, a two-story stone and wood structure, its wide main door inlaid with burnished copper disks. "I was born here, and here I live with my eldest brother's family and my unmarried sister. See, there is our mark over the door."

A pair of cats chasing a duck — all most lifelike — were rendered in bas-relief on the lintel.

As Alaric tied Lightfoot to the hitching ring set in the wall, Artuva began to search among her rags, in pockets, sleeves, and folds of cloth. She fumbled for some time, whimpering, "My key ... my key ... I seem to have lost my key. Besk will be furious. He'll have to change the lock."

Alaric took her arm. "I don't think you need worry about that. Shall we knock?"

"Oh, yes. Someone is usually home."

Stepping up to the door, Alaric knocked. While he waited for an answer, he noted that the copper disks set in the panel bore figures and scenes delicately engraved. If he had not seen an abundance of similar ornamentation in the rest of the city, he would think that Artuva came of a wealthy house. He had never visited such a city, not elsewhere in Garlenon's realm, not in Durman, not even in Royale, which was judged rich by eastern standards. This, he told himself, was truly a conqueror's capital.

The door opened, and a tall balding, middle-aged man looked out. "Yes?" he said.

Artuva squinted at him. "Who are you?"

"I am the head of this household, Orpether by name," he said.

"Head? Where is Besk? Where is my brother Besk?"

Orpether stared at her for a long moment. "My father Besk is in his grave."

"Grave?" Her mouth opened wide, and she wailed, "Oh, Besk, my Besk!" One-handed, she tore at her thin white hair until Mizella made her stop. "Seventeen years!" she moaned. "Seventeen years! Oh, my Besk!" She raised her arms in supplication. "And my sister Vinta ... she, too ...?"

Orpether glanced up and down the street, then reached out and gently took Artuva by the shoulder. "I think you'd best come inside." He looked from Alaric to Mizella, gestured for them to follow as well.

Beyond the door was a chamber furnished with upholstered chairs and small tables of patterned wood. Orpether bade them all sit, and he himself took the chair nearest the old woman's. She did not weep, but sat with downcast eyes and slumping shoulders.

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"You are .. Artuva?" Orpether said, his tone incredulous.

She nodded. Her face was pinched and tired, and the corners of her mouth sagged.

He touched her hand. "I am your nephew. I had just married when you were ... when you left."

"I remember the wedding," she muttered. "Besk was there. He danced till dawn."

"He died two years ago, Aunt Artuva. But Aunt Vinta is still with us, in vigorous health. She's out at market now and should return soon."

Artuva sighed. "He was such a handsome man, my dear brother."

"My eldest daughter shall draw a bath for you, Aunt, and lay out fresh clothes. Are you hungry? We have soup on the fire this very moment. I'll see to it." He hurried out of the room.

"He was the best of us all," Artuva murmured.

Mizella knelt beside the old woman's chair. "Your sister is well, and your nephew and his family. Dear lady, you knew that some things would be changed after so many years."

Artuva glanced at her, then at Alaric. "Seventeen years. Yes, some things have changed indeed. Besk has died, I have gotten old, and you, lord, have grown from a babe to a man. Shall we go to your father now?"

Alaric smiled. "We are hardly dressed for presentation at court. I have waited so many years; another day will matter little."

She plucked at her rags. "Forgive me, lord; I had forgotten I was so ill-clothed. That is an old woman's curse — forgetfulness. But *this* I cannot forget." She touched the stump of her left hand. "We go to the castle in the morning."

"Good lady, I think it would be better if I went alone, a poor minstrel to entertain my lord Baron. You and Mizella should stay here while I see what a minstrel's eyes can see."

"What, wary of your own father? Did I not say he was a fair man? You'll find he is not like his grandsire."

"I hope for the best."

Artuva's nephew and his thirteen-year-old daughter came in with bowls of thick, steaming soup and chunks of dark bread still warm from the oven. "You must tell us of your travels, Aunt — where you went and what manner of people you encountered," Orpether said. "You look well. Father feared you would wander the world hungry and cold; he sent a packet of clothes and money with one of the neighbor boys, but the lad rode three days and found no trace of you."

Artuva dipped up the soup with

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a silver spoon. "They took me far and fast. For a time I did wander the world hungry and cold, but lately Alaric and Mizella have been caring for me, and I have eaten well and slept warm."

Orpether inclined his head in Alaric's direction. "For my aunt's sake, sir, my house is yours."

Shortly after the food had been consumed, Vinta returned from her shopping, and there was a tearful reunion between the old women, followed by a bath and a change of clothing for Artuva. Mizella and Alaric toured the house with one of Orpether's sons, a lad of twelve, and they answered his eager questions about the world beyond Garlenon. Inevitably, the minstrel was asked for a song.

"I should sing for the lady of the house," he told the boy, "in thanks for her hospitality."

"Aunt Vinta won't care. She's nearly deaf."

"I mean your mother."

"Oh, she died when my little sister was born."

"Ah," said Alaric, and so he sang of the orphan prince who ruled a vast empire at an early age when all he really wanted was to wander the woods in search of butterflies. Four other children — three younger, one older than his guide — heard the music and came to form a ring about the singer. They listened, wide-eyed, to tales of goblins, elves, and unicorns until their father announced bedtime.

"You must tell them," Orpether said aside to Alaric, "that such creatures are imaginary. There is enough magic in the world without them."

Alaric shrugged. "There is magic in song, but precious little in the world. Surely your children understand the difference between the one and the other."

Orpether frowned at him. "In this part of the world, there is magic aplenty. I have heard that it is not so in other places."

"It is not so in most places."

"Well, we have advantages here that the rest of the world, it seems, does not."

"That is certainly true," Alaric said, gazing around the room at the colorful hangings and padded furniture. "I have been in castles that boasted fewer advantages."

"I suppose, then, that you have no special skill." The emphasis he placed on the last word made his meaning clear.

Alaric suppressed a smile. "None that I would call magic."

"You visit the castle tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"My eldest daughter can read the sticks for you."

"No. The lady Artuva offered

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that many a time, but I don't care to foresee the future. It will come as it comes, and I'll deal with it on that basis."

"One of our neighbors makes charms — they are quite inexpensive ..."

"No. I depend on my lute and my voice, thank you."

"The Baron is a man of great power."

"So I have been told. Men of great power tend to be rich; minstrels tend to be poor. Perhaps we can achieve some sort of equilibrium."

Orpether shook his head. "We do not bother the Baron. He has his own affairs, and we have ours. He keeps us safe, and we perform occasional services for him; he asks little."

"You are afraid of him."

"I would not visit him lightly. Especially without protection."

"My lack of gold is not a light matter to me." He laid a hand on Orpether's shoulder. "I am moved by your concern, my good host, but I think you worry unnecessarily."

"Dig your own grave, minstrel. I warn you only for my aunt's sake." Shaking his head, he turned and walked away.

Alaric and Mizella slept that night wrapped in a fluffy feather comforter on the sitting room floor.

"I'll come back, or else I'll send for you when I know how the wind blows," he said after the rest of the household had retired.

She stroked his face. "Poor minstrel. You don't know what to do with me, do you? I am hardly a fit companion for a Baron's son."

"There's none here that knows your past."

"*We* know, Alaric, and that is enough." She leaned over him, a dark shape in the dark room. "I release you from any obligation to me. You have earned my bread long enough; there is no need for you to do more than you have already done."

"Mizella —"

She stopped his words with her fingers. "My dearest minstrel, we are not tied together in any way. Go up to the castle; don't worry about me."

He gripped her hand. "Mizella, in a strange land —"

"But not among strangers, I think. Artuva's family is kind. Orpether has been without a wife for several years; if there were a woman he knew that was free and pleased him, he would have remarried before now. I am not unaware of my own attractions, Alaric. If you go up to the castle and become the Baron's son ... Orpether will know soon enough that I am no longer yours." She kissed his cheek. "Dear Alaric, anyone with eyes in his head knows

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that we are a mismated pair. Who could blame us for finding other, more appropriate partners?"

"You hardly know the man!"

"If not him, then another. It is a large city and rich; I think I could spend an easy lifetime here." She paused for a long moment, her lips close to his face. "We have been partners in despair; now, I see better times coming for both of us. We must be practical, dear minstrel. I know you still dream of her. Well, I have dreams, too. You have been good to me, and I have tried to be good to you, but we both know it was never love."

He was silent, felt her breath against his hair, her fingers light on his neck. "No," he said at last. "It was never love."

"Then hold me close, and we will bid farewell in the best possible manner."

In the morning their host served a hearty breakfast. "Allow me to loan you a fresh shirt," he said to Alaric.

The minstrel shrugged. "It would look quite out of place with my other garments." He dusted his worn and faded cloak with a borrowed brush, and then he shined his boots. "I'm a poor traveling minstrel, and I don't mind looking the part. I could use a fresh feather for my cap, though. This one has hardly a vane left." One of the children ran to fetch a green neck feather from a neighbor's goose. "My face is clean, my hands washed, and my lute polished to a high luster. What more does a minstrel need? I thank you for your hospitality, and for your advice, good Orpether. And thank you, lady Artuva," and he bent and kissed her gnarled hand, "for everything ..."

Artuva wore a clean gown today, and a silken bandeau in her hair — she was quite transformed from the pitiful wanderer of other days, and she even seemed to stand straighter. "Fare you well, young master," she said. "I've read the sticks for you, and I know you *will* fare well."

He smiled at the old woman's faith in nonsense. Then he turned to Mizella and kissed her cheek. "Take care of this one, my host."

Mizella smiled, both at Alaric and Orpether.

Orpether said, "I hope to see you again, young man."

Out on the street, though the hour was early, the crowd was already thick, flowing in a single direction — to the nearest marketplace. Alaric mounted Lightfoot and pressed toward the hill, against the traffic. A few other men rode horseback here and there, but most of the citizens walked; their smaller bodies slipping through openings in the throng that no horse could

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negotiate. Eventually, Alaric and Lightfoot moved into less populous areas.

Nearer the castle walls — indeed, on the very slope of the hill itself — the city ended abruptly, yielding to a no man's land of hard-packed barren earth and, just below the first tier of battlements, a dry moat partially obliterated by an accumulation of dirt and debris. Instead of a drawbridge there was a short causeway of dressed stone, and at the far end of the causeway, a portcullis barred the entrance to the castle. Just visible beyond the gate, two armored but helmetless men sat at a small table playing at dice. They noticed Alaric before he reached the portcullis, and they stood up, halberds in hand, and stared at him as he approached.

They might have been brothers, so strong was the facial and bodily resemblance between them. Their highly polished armor showed the Baron's crest on back and breastplate: two red chevrons on a black shield. The same emblem was bolted to naked stone above the entrance.

"Good day," said Alaric, and he dismounted to bow and doff his cap.

"Good day," said one of the men.

"Allow me to introduce myself: I am Alaric, purveyor of songs and master of the lute. I seek audience with the lord of this castle that I may brighten his dinner table and fill his evenings with days of yore, with knights and dragons and maidens fair. From beyond the eastern forest I have come to offer my skills, which, I say in all modesty, are not inconsiderable. May I plead my case before him, gentles?"

The men looked at each other, their expressions bland. "You sing," said the one who had acknowledged the greeting.

"Exactly. I sing most excellently well, sir. Kings have given me gold and lesser men their daughters in return for my songs."

They eyed his travel-worn state and raised their eyebrows skeptically. "Then why have you left those places to come here?"

"Wanderlust," Alaric said, smiling broadly. "New cities, new faces. The world is wide."

"Well, then, you'd better get on if you want to see the rest of it before you die." The two turned away from the portcullis and sat down to their game once more.

"But wait!" cried Alaric. "Your lord will surely enjoy my skills ... and I would greatly appreciate a little food and comfort on my journey."

"There's food and comfort in the city."

"But not like the castle."

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The guard who had not yet spoken looked up lazily. "We have no need of minstrels here."

Alaric's fingers curled around the thick iron bars. "Have you the authority to keep me out? Is there no one to whom I may appeal? I come highly recommended. I'll give you a sample of my wares ..." He unslung the lute and strummed a tentative chord, but he had not yet opened his mouth to sing when a halbred clanged sharply against the portcullis.

"Leave off, boy," said the first guard. "No one enters the castle without special permission of the Baron, and I am sure he won't be interested in a minstrel. Especially not a minstrel."

His partner nodded: "Sing in the markets," he advised. "You'll find plenty of silver there."

"Gentles," said Alaric, "I had hoped to sing before the greatest lords of the earth, insofar as I could find them. The Baron, I have heard, is greater than all the others I have entertained. How could I hold my head up among my fellow minstrels if I passed through his territory without singing for him?"

"We have our orders, boy. Go away or you'll wish you had."

Alaric did not have to feign dejection as he turned Lightfoot about and led him back toward the city. He hadn't expected to be turned away — minstrels rarely were. To reassure himself, he found a nearby inn, where the proprietor was glad enough to trade a cup of wine for a song. Alaric took the drink out onto the flagstone patio, where four heavy wooden tables testified to the continuing good weather. He sat in a hard-backed chair, leaned his elbows on a table, and stared up at the castle, which dominated the view from his vantage. Rising high above the concentric walls was the keep, a tall tower with crenelated parapet and many window slits. Alaric's practiced eye measured the distance to one of those windows; the perch was a precarious one, and even if he essayed it — what then? He tried to think of some fresh way to enter the castle innocently.

Presently, as he was nursing his cup and gazing out into the street at the passing traffic, he heard young voices raised in simple, two part harmony. He glanced this way and that and saw them finally: six small dark-haired children — the eldest no more than seven or eight — walking down the main street, holding hands and singing. Every one of them was clothed all in black but for two red chevrons sewn on the breast and back of his short-sleeved tunic. They skipped up to the portcullis and were admitted immediately.

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Soon, their song faded in the distance.

A customer of the inn, a grizzled old man who had been sitting at a table at the far end of the patio since Alaric's arrival, moved to a nearer chair. He sported pearls in both ears and a cravat of multicolored silk tucked into a soft blue tunic. Anywhere in the more familiar world, Alaric would have judged him rich, but here he was certainly just an average citizen. He smiled.

"I'll buy your second cup of wine," he said. "It was a fine song."

"Thank you, sir," replied Alaric, and he motioned to the landlord to comply with the old man's offer.

"Stranger, are you not?"

Alaric nodded.

"Your clothes give you away."

The minstrel glanced from his patron's wealthy attire to his own worn gear. "They are the only clothes I have, sir."

The old man held up a hand. "I meant no offense, young stranger."

"Then no offense is taken." Alaric lifted his freshened cup in a silent toast, which the old man answered in kind, and together they quaffed red wine in the morning sun.

"I sit here often," the old man said. "I watch the chevroned children come out of that gate to play, and I watch the carts of tribute go in to be counted by our lord Baron. Today ... I saw you turned away."

"Indeed, I was turned away. I offered song and was rejected." He laughed dryly. "I am not accustomed to that. My songs have always been good enough for all manner of high-born folk, for kings and princes."

The old man rubbed his clean-shaven chin with thumb and forefinger. "Well, it is not an easy task to enter that gate. One must have business within."

"I had business. Or, at least, I offered entertainment. Surely that is business enough."

"Ah, perhaps if you had a dancing bear or could stand on your head and walk on your hands, you would have business in the castle, but song ... young stranger, you heard those children, did you not?"

"I heard them."

"And so does the rest of the city, regularly, every time they come out to the street. I think perhaps those in the castle have enough of song."

Alaric fingered his lute. "I doubt those children know the sort of songs I would offer."

The old man shrugged.

"When the guard changes," said Alaric, "I will try again."

The old man's eyebrows rose.

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"I would not be so eager to pass through that portal."

"Is there something to fear within?"

He lowered his voice. "I have no certain knowledge, you must understand ... but some say the Baron has a glass of rare workmanship that enables him to see the four corners of the earth, to hear men's very thoughts, to strike an enemy dead by speaking his name. Myself, I take care to harbor no thoughts which would excite his interest."

Alaric played a simple melody on the lute, but he sang no words, only hummed in counterpoint. "Good sir," he said at last, "I have never visited a city where the people feared their lord so greatly. Yet you are all rich and busy, and you smile at each other as you pass on the street."

The old man sipped the last of his wine as he considered his answer. "It is a habit of mind, I think. Our fathers feared his father, our grandfathers feared his grandfather, and so we fear him. Can one feel otherwise toward a man whose hands hold the power of life and death?"

"One can. Other citizens in other cities love their lords."

"Ah, love. Yes, we do love him, for he gives us peace and justice. But fear is by far a stronger emotion."

"And when he comes out into the city — do you cheer him or hide your faces?"

"He rarely comes out."

"And when he does?"

"We stand respectful, of course. He has never asked for other behavior."

Alaric stared up at the castle. "He must be a lonely man."

"I doubt it. He has plenty of company up there."

"I was told that his family has ruled this land for ten generations."

The old man closed his eyes and seemed to count silently. "That sounds like an accurate figure."

"It must have been a wild territory at one time, to require such a castle."

"Yes, lad, long, long ago. The castle is much older than my lord Baron's family. It was here before the city, before the earliest citizen built his mud hut at the base of the hill. See that squat crumbling building below the Third Wall — the outermost Wall?" He pointed with a bony finger to a jagged-topped structure that was streaked dark with the soot and dust of many years, darker by far than the castle itself. "There is the original keep, or so it is said, built no one knows how long ago, built into the very side of the hill."

Alaric squinted at the indicated

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building. "I have never seen a keep built on the *side* of a hill."

"You're thinking it a poor fortification, that it ought to be at the top."

"Exactly."

"Well," and the old man leaned back in his chair and gazed meditatively at the hillside, "they say that the slope was steeper in those days, and not so grassy. They say the crest was unassailable. And, of course, the far side is almost sheer. No, that was as high as the old builders could reach, it seems. Not really a bad fortification; it commands the valley, yields a good view of the foothills. One can probably see as far as the river at that height. They call it the Castle Under the Hill."

"To distinguish it from the castle on top of the hill."

"Yes."

"It looks in poor repair."

"It is a ruin, uninhabited for generations. The Baron's ancestors abandoned it when they completed their own keep at the crest — what a task *that* must have been!"

"He should tear it down."

"Ah, no. There is a legend about it, that the castle on top of the hill will never be taken as long as the Castle Under the Hill stands. So you see, he leaves it. A careful man, our lord."

Alaric shook his head. "A legend."

The old man looked at Alaric sidewise. "Who knows what truth there is in legends? My grandfather once suggested that the source of the Garlenon power was in that ruined keep. It is well-sealed with brick and steel to prevent the curious from investigating."

"Were I the Baron, I would remove the source of my power to safer storage within the walls of my castle."

The old man smiled. "We have many legends, many rumors in this city. Perhaps you'll set some of them to music during your stay. The guard changes after the noonday meal. If you pass your cap among the bachelors who will gather here to eat, you may find your songs earning enough to compensate you somewhat for being turned away again."

"You think I'll be turned away again?"

"You think not? The guards are the lord Baron's cousins. They know his mind."

"His cousins?"

"Yes. Every one of them."

Alaric sighed. "I suppose I must practice walking on my hands then."

The old man laughed.

After the meal, during which Alaric did indeed acquire a substantial number of coins, the old man bade him farewell and

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went off on some business of his own. The inn, which had been virtually empty all morning, filled when the landlord began to bring out plates of steaming stew and buttered noodles, and it stayed full for the afternoon as men came and went, ate and drank and diced at the tables. Alaric sang and sang again, and his cap waxed heavy with money, not just copper and silver, but gold as well. He sang of love and death and high adventure in exotic lands where the trees bore purple leaves, the grass grew red as blood, and the men were four-armed giants. He sang of winged horses and speaking fish and rivers of wine. He sang for drunks and sober men, for women and their young children, and for a pair of youths who insisted they, too, could play the lute; but he refused to surrender the instrument to their fancies and never knew if their claims were true.

Toward evening, he tired, and even the offer of a cup of wine could not persuade him to continue. His voice was still clear and light, but he knew his limitations, and he could judge by the state of his throat that they were fast approaching.

"Tomorrow is another day," he said, and he went out on the patio to sit in the fading sunlight. He gazed up at the castle and wondered if he should try for admission again or wait till the morrow. He was still sitting thus and musing when the young woman arrived.

She was tall and slender, dark-haired and dark-eyed, though pale-skinned; she might have been a sister to the guards at the gate. She wore a full-skirted, long-sleeved black dress ornamented only by the double red chevrons splashed across its close-fitting bodice.

"You are the minstrel who sought entrance to the castle this morning?" she asked.

Alaric stood up, bowed deeply. "I am."

She stared long at his face, her eyes narrowed. "What is your name?"

"Alaric."

"Where are you from?"

"Everywhere. But principally, the east, beyond the great forest."

"I am the lady Dejarnemir. You are to come with me."

"To where, my lady?"

She nodded toward the castle. "You wished to enter, did you not?"

"Yes, my lady." He picked up his lute and followed her into the street. Draping Lightfoot's reins over his shoulder, he let the horse amble behind them.

The woman walked swiftly and surely, without looking back, and the portcullis rose smoothly at her

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approach. The new guardsmen greeted her and stood aside to let her pass; they strongly resembled the earlier pair, and Alaric could well believe that guards and woman alike came of a single family. He wondered if he resembled them; he had never seen his face in a good mirror and had only Artuva's word that he favored the Baron. Had Dejarnemir stared so long because it was true?

Within the Third Wall was a shady courtyard invisible from the city; a grassy lawn and low trees flanked the flagstone stairway that led uphill to the massive Second Wall. Beyond the greenery, the space between ramparts was crowded with two-story structures of pale stone and red-painted wood, their windows festooned with flowers, their walls with ivy, the peaks of their shingled red roofs rearing almost into the dimming sunlight.

Brightly painted benches and tables were scattered among the trees, and groups of merrymakers clustered about them, talking, laughing, and drinking from crystal and silver goblets. Some of these folk wore black and red garments like Dejarnemir's, but most were dressed in colorful finery garnished with gems and gold. Of the latter, three only did not bear the stamp of the Baron's household on their faces — three women no less richly garbed than their fellows, one fair-haired, one swarthy-skinned, the third a blazing redhead. They sat together, a trio of beauties, and though their costumes differed in every detail of style, color, and trim, each of them wore upon her breast the selfsame thick gold chain and heart-shaped ruby pendant. They alone of the throng inclined their heads as Dejarnemir passed; the others waved or smiled or merely watched.

A small boy came down the stairway to take charge of Lightfoot, and he led the horse away along a flagstone path that wound between the red-roofed buildings.

Alaric and his guide climbed to the top of the steps.

"Earlier, I was turned away, my lady," he said. "Why am I invited in now, and who am I bound to see?"

Her gaze skimmed over his body, lit on his face and held there. "The men you spoke to mistook the Baron's pleasure. If you do indeed come from beyond the eastern forest, you may be able to offer us a few new songs."

"A hundred. The farther I wander, the fewer of my songs are known to my listeners."

She shrugged, a tiny movement of head and shoulders. "We know a good many here."

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"I heard the children singing a simple rhyme. There are other songs, more complex, more interesting—"

"Children must begin with simple music. Come." She turned to the iron-banded gate of the Second Wall, which was shut tight. At her sharp knock the guard within slowly swung it open.

Their route was totally enclosed now, a long flight of steps leading ever upward, broken by the broad level spaces of cross-corridors. Oil lamps on either wall illuminated the high-ceilinged stone staircase, casting weird, multiple shadows on the walls and floors. A few people moved here, and all of these bore the familial resemblance that Alaric had noted on so many faces. One or two greeted Dejarnemir with a nod, but none stopped to speak.

A dozen steps below the summit, she paused, breathing heavily. "The main hall is before us, and you will meet the Baron there. I suggest that you kneel."

A short curved corridor opened into a large room crowded with rows of long tables and straight-backed chairs and hung with tapestries and gleaming weapons. High narrow windows admitted the remnants of late afternoon light, which was augmented by oil lamps mounted at wide intervals along the walls. On a dais opposite the doorway rested an ornately carved table of ebony, thickly gilded; two people sat there in chairs that might better be termed thrones: the man was near fifty, powerfully built and tall, his dark hair and beard shot with gray; the woman might have been a few years younger, was equally tall, a more mature version of Dejarnemir. She could have been the Baron's sister, but Alaric guessed that she was his cousin and his wife. When she caught sight of the minstrel, she sat a little straighter in her chair—a subdued reaction, but one that told Alaric everything: this was his mother, and she knew him.

He approached the dais and knelt.

"Here is the minstrel, lord," said Dejarnemir.

Baron Garlenon rose slowly and walked around the table for a closer view. "Stand up, boy."

Alaric stood.

"What is your name?" His eyes drank in the minstrel's face.

"Alaric, lord."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, come this summer."

"Where were you born?"

"I was a foundling, lord, and grew up in the village of Garthem in the land of Amberstow, far to the east of the great eastern forest."

The Baron looked over his

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shoulder at the woman. "What say you, cousin?"

She joined him, standing so close to Alaric that her long skirt brushed his boots. "I say the test."

The Baron plucked at his beard. "It may be pure coincidence."

"It is not."

"Lorenta, I would rather let him go his way than see him fail the test."

"He will not fail." She touched Alaric's hair gently, felt of its texture with thumb and forefinger. "He will not fail."

"You are too sure."

"He is a minstrel."

The Baron sighed. "Yes, he is a minstrel."

Lorenta put her hand beneath Alaric's chin and turned his face to profile. "Young singer, are you our child?" Her tone was peremptory, compelling, and Alaric found himself discarding the last shreds of an inclination to masquerade.

"Yes, my lady, I am."

"How do you know?"

"Artuva, the midwife who attended my birth, told me."

The Baron shook his head. "A chance resemblance, and she told him he could wring gold from it."

"I was found on a hillside, newborn and naked, and a bloody severed hand was clutching my ankles. My foster parents always assumed that magic was involved somehow. When Artuva told me her story and showed me the stump of her hand, I knew who I was. She said I resembled you, and I am the proper age. Who else can I be?"

"Who else indeed," said the Baron, "except an imposter?"

"The test, cousin," said his consort.

"You claim to be our child. Very well. There is a test which will prove or disprove that claim. Will you attempt it, or will you leave my domain and never return?"

"I will attempt any test you set me, lord."

"Then come with me." A stone stairway curved upward along one wall of the great room; the Baron began to climb, and Alaric, Lorenta, and Dejarnemir — with a candle — followed closely.

Their destination was a narrow, windowless, hearthless cubicle. The wavering flame of the candle revealed unadorned gray walls and a bare floor; just beyond the threshold, a circle was inscribed in black on the smooth stone underfoot. While the ladies hung back, the Baron walked to the far end of the room and motioned Alaric to join him. The young minstrel had hardly obeyed when iron bars descended from the ceiling to separate him from the door.

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"There is only one way out of this room, my supposed child," said the Baron. "Do not bother to search for loose stones hiding secret passages or windows or some trap door beneath the bars — there are none of those things here. One way only, and if you cannot discover it, you must stay in this room till you die."

Alaric looked at the Baron. "You are sealed in as well."

"I was," said the Baron, and he vanished. The sharp clap of air rushing to fill the void startled Alaric — he had never seen another person use his mode of travel.

"Come to me, Alaric," the Baron said from beyond the bars. He pointed to the black circle at his feet. "If you be a true Garlenon, come here."

Alaric smiled, and he was there.

The Baron laid his hand on Alaric's shoulder. "Welcome home."

Alaric felt his throat tighten, and he spoke haltingly. "I was afraid ... that I was a freak."

His mother stepped close, linked her arm in his. "We are all freaks, Alaric. Every soul of Garlenon — your cousins all — can do that which you have just done."

"True," said the Baron, "but none of us could do it at birth. We found our power later, the boys when they sprouted beards, the girls when they first came under the moon's influence. We thought, when you vanished at birth, that we had lost you forever, for how could a newborn babe envision some destination other than ... nothingness? But you lived, and you have returned to us. It was well, then, that I banished Artuva instead of executing her."

"She deserved neither," Alaric said, frowning. "She was not at fault."

"Of course not," said his mother, "but we could not allow her to spread tales among the populace. The power is best used when secretly used."

"I have tried to use it as little as possible. A reputation for magic is not one I ever desired."

"You could have been very rich," said the Baron.

"I could have been very dead as well. In some countries, magic is not looked upon so casually."

Lorenta nodded to her husband. "He has been wise."

"He has at least been careful — that is a virtue worth possessing."

"Come, Alaric," she said, drawing toward the doorway. "Let us return to comfort and relax with a cup of wine, and you can tell of your life far from Garlenon. You were found on a hillside, you said..."

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Sitting on the dais steps, he spoke at length of his foster parents, his childhood, his discovery of Dall, and his wanderings after Dall's death, but he omitted a few personal details: Solinde, his exile from Royale, and Mizella; those things strangers — even though they be parents — had no claim upon. The hall filled slowly, some family members appearing from air at the tables, each behind a chair in which he then seated himself, others — mainly youngsters — walking in through the doorway to claim their seats. Soon his audience numbered near a hundred. Alaric marveled at their silence, their attentiveness, their familial resemblance. At last, he interrupted his reminiscence just after his meeting with Artuva in the well to say, "I've never seen my face in a good mirror, and now I know I will never need to."

A few of the older people smiled, and Dejarnemir, who stood at the edge of the dais, laughed quietly. She stepped forward, inclined her head toward the Baron, and said, "With your permission, lord." He waved a hand, and she vanished, to reappear in the same spot almost instantly, bearing a silver-backed oval mirror. Leaning toward Alaric, she held it up before his eyes.

He had seen his face in still pools of water, in the highly polished surfaces of copper pots, in the smooth wooden sheen of his lute, but now he knew that he had never really seen his face at all.

"You shave well," said Dejarnemir, "for a man who has no good mirror."

Alaric touched his own cheek, traced the line of his nose, the cut of his chin, the angle of his brows; then he turned his gaze to the Baron and his wife and saw his own features in theirs, but not in theirs alone. Any middle-aged man in the room could be his father, any matron his mother, any youth his brother, and maiden his sister. He had seen them as a family from the first — now he saw himself among them.

He glanced at the glass, at Dejarnemir, who held it steady before him. "You are my cousin," he said.

"We are all your cousins." She began to introduce the throng, naming names for row on row of similar faces, and Alaric marveled that she could distinguish one from the other. He let the names flow through his mind like water. Later there would be time to meet them as individuals.

"Now," said the Baron, when almost half the group had greeted their new relative, "I think we will show cousin Alaric exactly why he

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was turned away from our gate this morning. Clohelet, you may lead 'Fairy Gifts of Silver and Gold.'"

A young woman of about Dejarnemir's age moved away from her chair to stand in the center of the room; all those similar faces turned in her direction as she raised her hands, palms outward, fingers stiffly spread. The crowd fell silent on an indrawn breath.

Clohelet gestured sharply, and suddenly the hall rang with song.

Alaric was astonished. He had heard the children sing their merry round, but that display bore only a remote resemblance to this chorus. The House of Garlenon had divided into four-part harmony, male voices against female, high voices against low, and the whole was a majestic sound like all the minstrels in the world gathered under one roof. No instruments accompanied them, but the women were flutes and harps enough, the men drums and deep horns. The sound swelled, faded, whispered or roared at Clohelet's gesture — a human instrument obedient to her slightest whim. Even the Baron himself and his consort followed Clohelet's direction as she shaped their music in the air.

And in spite of the multitude of voices, the words were clear and crisp.:

"Fairy gifts of silver and gold
I bring my lady tonight,
And if they turn to dross at dawn,
What care I, for I'll be gone,
Too woo the next with a pretty song
And fairy silver bright ..."

Alaric listened, entranced, the only person in the room not singing. When the music was done, he looked down at the lute which he had carried through the castle on his back and which now rested on the floor at his feet, and he thought about his own arrogance, his pride in his voice and fingers.

"But now you must show us your wares," said the Baron.

Alaric shook his head. "It's a poor show compared with what I have just heard."

"Ah, we warble singly as well as in large groups. If you've a song we haven't heard already, we'll listen gladly."

Alaric sang, but only half-heartedly, of a dragon-slaying knight and the fair princess he married. His voice sounded hollow to his own ears, as if he were in a vaster room, an empty room. His audience sat as silent and attentive as during the tale of his life, and afterward, they turned to each other and murmured quietly.

"Your voice is true," said the Baron, "but we have stolen the fullness from it. I apologize. I should have asked you to sing first."

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"I would rather listen," said Alaric.

"You might join us," the Baron told him. "We melt together in chorus, and no singer can hear his own voice but only those surrounding him. There lies the true joy of song, not in mere listening."

"It is ... an experience I have never known."

"Your age mates can train you in a song or two so that you may discover it. Dejarnemir, come to me."

She obeyed.

"He is your charge. Teach him. And find him some new clothes." The finality of his tone was punctuated by the clap of air that accompanied his disappearance.

"Come, cousin," said Dejarnemir, "and meet your age mates."

His mother nodded, and then she, too, vanished.

The young people were clustered at a table near the stairway. Clohelet was there — she who had led the chorus so artfully — and another cast in the same mold: Nidida. The rest were Bralion, Feronak, and Sarel, all youths in the first flush of manhood. Alaric searched their faces for the subtle details that would enable him to tell them one from the other.

"We have our differences, cousin," said Bralion, openly returning Alaric's stare.

"How come such intense resemblance in so large a family?" the minstrel asked.

Bralion shrugged. "For ten generations, no Garlenon has married outside the House."

"Truly?"

Dejarnemir said, "It was ten generations ago that the first Baron Garlenon discovered in himself the power of instantaneous travel. Desiring to cultivate it in his heirs, he married his cousin, arranged cousin marriages for his children, and so on, till we are all cousins now. And we all have that same power."

Alaric looked from one face to another. "You are my cousins ... Have I brothers and sisters as well?"

"Brothers and sisters, parents and children, all are cousins," said Dejarnemir. "The Baron, your father, is the son of your mother's father's sister and your mother's mother's brother, and therefore your cousin. The genealogy is far more complex than that, of course, but I'll leave it there for now."

Alaric shook his head. "How can you remember such intricacies of relationship?"

"We live with them every day. In this case, however, I'll admit that I am more personally interested than most. He is my father, too, and Bralion's."

"You are my sister," Alaric said, and he glanced from her face

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to Bralion's, saw the same resemblance there that he saw in the rest of the room, no more, no less.

"Two other siblings belong to a younger age group, one to an elder," she said.

"He will be the next head of the House," added Bralion. "You'll see him seated beside the Baron at supper. He has a beard."

"In my foster home," Alaric said softly, "I had neither brother nor sister." He thought of Mira, his foster mother, who had made his childhood less than completely lonely by keeping him ever at her side. The other children of the village shunned him or even threw stones, and their parents dragged them indoors if he happened to pass by; they feared his mysterious origins. His foster father, too, knew such fear, and it turned him to violence when Mira was no longer alive to command his actions. It was then that Alaric discovered the greater loneliness, if greater safety, of a feral life in the woods; at seventeen it shamed him to recall that he had hardly been human by the time Dall found him.

He gazed out over the crowd in Castle Garlenon — rich fabrics, gold, silver, and gems glinted in the lamplight; stewards — more family members — were just entering with trays of flatware and crystal for the evening meal. The one-room mud and thatch hut of his childhood was worlds away, the three stools that were its only furniture, the gray wool homespun that had clothed him winter and summer, the porridge breakfasts and suppers spiced but rarely with a slab or two of tough old mutton. *Oh, if my infant heart had known what it was forsaking!*

"This is your chair," said Dejarnemir, leaning on the high slatted back. "Remember well the area immediately behind it, for that is the only place in the main hall to which you may freely jump."

"Jump?"

"We call our power jumping. You may not jump to or from any other spot in this room without the Baron's special permission. And no one else may jump to your chair, nor may he walk behind it unless you are already seated."

Alaric said, "With so many people using this mode of travel in the castle, it does seem that some injury would result, perhaps from two arriving at the same place ..."

"We follow certain simple rules. We walk close to the corridor walls — the center is reserved for short-distance jumping; we never jump blindly round a corner; we never jump to the intersection of two corridors; we have our own customary places in each other's apartments and the common quarters. You'll learn. If you

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should entertain any doubts, someone will be nearby to instruct you. *Never guess.* Bralion, do you think you could find our new cousin proper attire for supper?"

"I could. I suppose we must walk to my rooms. Well, come along, cousin Alaric, and mark the route so that you'll not have to walk it more than once."

As they descended five flights of stairs, Alaric said, "I assume that the lady Dejarnemir did *not* go down to the city to fetch me on the chance that I might know a few new songs."

"You assume correctly. The guards reported your petition for entry — and your uncanny appearance. One Garlenon knows another, after all, even if he's never seen him before. The Baroness thought of the lost babe and insisted upon seeing you herself."

"They should not have turned me away from the gate. I might have left the city."

"No, they should not have turned you away, but they had their orders, and they honestly believed we needed no minstrel." He grinned at Alaric. "It's true enough, cousin, is it not?"

Alaric had to acknowledge that.

"They kept watch on the inn. Had you left for some other place, you would have been followed. The Baron and Baroness discussed the situation for some time — and in the end, *she* prevailed." He halted before an ebony door carved with hawks and rabbits. "Remember this spot; you'll be coming here often, I think." The door was unlocked.

A huge dog with red-gold fur greeted Bralion as he entered, ran about and between his legs, reared up to place great paws on his chest, and licked his face. "This is Delf. Delf, this is your new cousin, Alaric."

Alaric let the dog sniff him, then stroked the sleek fur. "Even the dog is a cousin?"

"Informally," said Bralion, and he pushed the animal firmly aside and bade it lie down.

The room was furnished with large comfortable chairs and heavy tables. The soot-blackened fireplace was cold but contained a thick bed of ash and fresh-laid logs and kindling; an oil lamp on the mantle provided illumination.

"Beyond the drapery," said Bralion, and he and Alaric passed into a small but opulent bedchamber. The bed was wide, covered with a green velvet comforter; the floor was hidden by a plush brown and green carpet; the walls were hung with tapestries of hunting scenes, with swords, bows, and arrows, with horns, antlers, and tusks of every size.

Bralion swept a pile of cushions off the brass-bound chest at the

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foot of the bed. "Have you a color preference?" he asked as he tilted up the lid.

"No."

"Blue? Gray? Some of both, I think. Here, cousin, these will surely fit you." He tossed a brilliant blue brocade tunic and a pair of blue-gray hose to Alaric. "The boots go poorly with these; you might try some black buskins — not fit for much walking, but then, none of us walks if he can help it, eh?"

Alaric stripped off his travel-worn clothing, laying the lute gently aside on the bed. "I would have thought that the Baron's children would live in the keep."

"This chain will look good on that outfit." He held up a necklet of linked gold medallions. "Dejarnemir will probably take you to the tailor tomorrow." He closed the chest and sat on top of it while Alaric dressed. "The Baron has declared it her task to train you into the family, but *I* will take the liberty of advising you thus, Alaric: we are all truly cousins. There are no special privileges here, no significance of rank or duty attached to sibship and parenthood. Feronak, for example, is as much the Baron's son as I, though he is not the Baron's son at all. We are all equal cousins."

"Except our eldest brother," Alaric said, slipping his feet into the soft velvet buskins.

"He showed an early aptitude, and now he is being trained for leadership. Someone must, and I for one am glad it is not I; I'd rather take orders than give them."

"So I call everyone cousin?"

Bralion nodded. "Everyone but the Baron and Baroness. They are lord and lady, at least until you are a few years older."

"Not ... mother and father."

"No. Never."

"I see." Alaric donned the gold chain last, and Bralion helped him fix it to loops on the shoulders of his tunic.

"It's really quite simple. Now, let us return to the outer chamber and determine your jumping place." He held the draperies aside. "Ah, here, in the corner behind this chair. Mark it well."

"I mark it."

"Do you think you can jump back to the hall?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you there. You can leave your old clothes; I'll have them washed with mine." He was gone.

Alaric turned back to the bedchamber for his lute. As he picked it up, his gaze fell upon one particular trophy on the far wall — the wide antlers of a buck red deer. Dall had shot a red deer once, he remembered, and they had traded most of the meat for silver at the

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nearest town. *Ah, Dall, I seem to have found some kind of home far from your grave, and far, too, from Royale.* Once more, he thought of Solinde, who had loved two minstrels and lost them both. Did she dream, in her wildest flights of fancy, that he came of a noble house?

No special privileges, Bralion had said; Alaric was just one more cousin, bound like the others to obey the Baron as liege lord. He wondered what the Baron would say to a marriage outside the House in the eleventh generation.

He looked down at his borrowed clothing. The court of Royale would hardly know him in such garb.

His stomach reminded him of supper, and he jumped to the hall.

His age mates were seated already — he recognized them by their clothing: Dejarnemir in her black gown with the Baron's red chevrons across breast and back, Bralion beside her in blue, Feronak in scarlet, Nidida in green and white, Sarel in yellow, and Clohelet in pink and lavender. Their faces still looked alike to him, though he thought he might have known Dejarnemir in some other dress. She came forward to take his arm and escort him to the table.

Supper included an array of foods and flavors that Alaric had never tasted before: birds from cooler climes and fruits from warmer, vegetables of all colors, sauces sharp and mild, sweet and sour, hot and cold. He sampled everything, drank much good wine, and listened curiously to the table talk, which came primarily from members of an older generation.

"Killing the dog accomplished it," said one middle-aged man.

His neighbor disagreed. "It was an unnecessary risk. He had already been convinced."

"He didn't *say* he was convinced. He didn't *act* convinced."

"We didn't give him enough time. Another day or two and he would have come crawling to us."

"No, it was the dog. He couldn't imagine how it was done, save by magic. And when we told him *he* was next ..."

There were smiles all round the table at his unfinished sentence.

"Did you see the stones?" remarked a woman. "He has a fine gem cutter or two in his town. Perhaps they should be here instead."

Several nodded, but one man said, "I believe the stones came from elsewhere."

"Well, we ought to find the source," said the woman.

"I don't doubt that we will."

Feronak spoke, pitching his voice to reach only his nearby age mates. "Who's for a game?"

"I," said Sarel and Nidida.

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Bralion, Dejarnemir, and Clohelet nodded agreement.

"My place?" suggested Feronak.

Bralion said, "No. Cousin Alaric doesn't know where it is. Let's say my sitting room. Shall we jump?" He disappeared, and instead of replying, the others disappeared, too.

Taken by surprise, Alaric found himself abruptly alone at the foot of the table. The older people ignored the mass exit and continued their conversation. Hastily gulping the last of his wine, Alaric jumped.

The others were already there, of course, waiting for him.

"Slow reflexes," said Feronak. "I suppose that's because you haven't done much jumping in your life in the Outlands." He sat on the floor stroking Bralion's red-gold dog.

"I've jumped now and then," replied Alaric, "but not regularly."

"You had a game in mind?" Bralion said to Feronak.

"I did indeed, and I propose it especially in honor of our new cousin — a round of Blind Man.'"

"Oho, vicious!" giggled Nidida.

"Exactly," said Feronak, crossing his arms over his chest and grinning so broadly that his cheeks seemed likely to burst.

"Hardly fair," said Bralion. "I don't think he can tell us apart yet with his eyes open."

"Oh, come now, cousin. He surely has the Garlenon memory. I'll wager he does well enough."

"How much will you wager?" asked Bralion.

Feronak looked to Alaric, considered him with narrowed eyes and furrowed brow. "Three nights," he said at last.

"Elvala, isn't it?"

"You know it is, cousin. It's been she for months."

"Quite a wager, cousin. I think you're a bit too sure. Unless, of course, you're tiring of the lady."

"Will you accept the wager?"

"What can I offer of equal value ... if I don't know the value of *your* offer?" When Feronak made no reply, Bralion said, "Very well. If I lose, I'll take your gate watch for three days. Will that do?"

Feronak exhaled a long breath. "That will do excellently."

"Does someone have a blindfold? Clohelet, your kerchief."

She drew a turquoise silk from her sleeve and passed it to Bralion.

"Come, cousin Alaric," he said. "Now we must wind this bandage about your eyes and administer our own test of your authenticity. This one, however, will not put your life in jeopardy."

"What manner of sport is this?" asked Alaric.

"A child's game," Feronak replied. "One we play often as we grow into our power, for we can't

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cheat at it. When your eyes are sealed, we spin you round till you nearly fall over with dizziness, then we move about the room to further confuse you. Blinded, you must locate one of us and identify by touch alone."

"And you mustn't be sick," Nidida said. "If you get sick, you lose immediately."

"Hush, Nidida," said Dejarnemir.

"I fear you'll lose your wager, cousin Feronak," said Alaric.

Feronak shrugged. "If I were always sure of the outcome, I would never bother gambling."

"Now the bandage," said Bralion, and he wrapped the silk round and round Alaric's head until all vestiges of light were blotted out. "And now the spin." He took Alaric by the shoulders and turned and turned and turned ... until Alaric cried halt.

"I will be sick if this goes on, and much as I wish to please my cousin Nidida, I do not care to spoil the carpet."

Bralion stepped away, and Alaric staggered a moment before drawing himself up straight. The darkness of his mind still whirled, and his stomach was none too comfortable. "I can remember spinning like a top as a child, for the pure joy of it, but I haven't done so in years, and now I know why. Oh, who would wish to play any game after such an experience?"

No one answered him, and he listened closely to the room, thinking that they might have all jumped away, that this whole diversion was actually a joke on him. But, no, there was a barely suppressed giggle, there a quiet step, and there a long skirt brushing the rug. He waited till his sense of balance returned, and then he moved forward slantwise, toward the last sound, his arms outstretched.

His right hand encountered smooth cloth molded over soft yielding flesh — a breast. "I believe I have found one of the ladies," he said. A masculine laugh erupted behind him, but the woman he touched made no sound. From that, he assumed she was not Nidida. "My apologies, cousin, but a blindfolded man is not responsible for any accidental breach of etiquette."

He felt of her head, her hair, the lines of her jaw and nose, and he knew they would not reveal her identity to his stranger's hands. Of her gown, however, he had a clear memory — it was not the loosely draping, puff-sleeved dress of Clohelet nor the low-necked, tight-waisted garb of Nidida. His fingers touched her shoulders and her back, located the seams that marked the positions of the two red chevrons.

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"This is Dejarnemir," he said.

The silk was slipped away from his eyes, and he found himself gazing at her face.

She smiled. "Feronak has won his wager."

Behind him, Alaric heard Bralion give a mock sigh. "The fair Elvala must needs wait till some other time."

Feronak clapped his new cousin's shoulder. "Welcome, O true member of the House of Garlenon. This calls for wine. Bralion, as loser ..."

"Yes, as loser," said Bralion, and he vanished in search of a decanter, to return only a moment later.

"I am flattered," said Dejarnemir to Alaric, "that you remembered ... the dress."

"In future, I will remember your face," he said.

Feronak passed him a glass of red wine. "Beyond the eastern forest, where you have been — beyond the edge of the world, it would seem—what is it like there, cousin?"

Alaric sat down on a green velvet couch, and Feronak sat beside him. Bralion, Clohelet, Sarel, and Nidida found their own chairs and pulled them close. Dejarnemir transferred flame from the oil lamp above the mantle to the kindling on the hearth, then took a cushion near the new warmth.

"Beyond the eastern forest," said Alaric, "the world is much like it is here, but poorer. I have sung in great houses, in palaces, but none so rich as this." He laughed. "Little did I dream that I belonged in such a place." He raised his glass in a toast. "To the House of Garlenon — long may it prosper."

"Of course," said Bralion, and he drained his wine to the dregs. The others followed suit.

Alaric gazed at his glass, at the fine color of the liquid within. "This wine is excellent."

"It comes from a vineyard to the south," said Feronak. "The finest vineyard in the world."

"Well, the finest vineyard that we know," said Bralion.

"I go there every year to make certain that the entire crop is sent to us," said Feronak.

"And to keep the local vassal properly respectful," murmured Dejarnemir, prodding the fire with a long-handled poker.

"They don't give us much trouble there." Feronak replied. "That business with the younger son is hardly worth mentioning."

Dejarnemir drew a burning splint from the fire and blew it out like a candle. "What do you think the Baron will do with our new cousin?"

Feronak shrugged. "Put him on guard duty at the Second Gate perhaps. He's not trained beyond that. He'll have to take lessons with

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the younger age group."

"I don't think so," said Dejarnemir.

"Oh, he will take lessons," said Bralion. "The Baron wouldn't omit that, but I understand your meaning: cousin Alaric has vast knowledge of the Outlands. The Baron won't waste that knowledge on guard duty."

"You're going to have a special place in the household someday, cousin Alaric," said Dejarnemir. "Special duties and special obligations."

"I will rely on your assistance."

"I see great times ahead for the House of Garlenon."

"I see hard work," said Bralion. "Sometimes I wish we could leave off conquering new lands and stay as we are now."

"Don't let the Baron hear that," said Feronak.

"He knows of my laziness, and he knows, too, that I always follow orders." His fingers turned his wine glass slowly, feeling of its intricate etched design. "I am allowed to have my own thoughts and desires; we are all allowed that."

"You could retire to an estate," said Feronak.

"What, and leave you to dice alone, cousin? No, I'll stay and do my share. It's well that someone else will be the next Baron, though, for I have no ambition beyond this wine, these clothes, this furniture. What can the rest of the world give us that would be better yet?"

"We won't know until we go there," said Dejarnemir. "Furs, spices, gems of some new color. I've heard that somewhere to the east are folk with yellow skin and slanted eyes. Is this true, cousin Alaric?"

"Not to my knowledge. Unless they live much farther east than my home."

"Your former home," said Dejarnemir.

"Yes, my former home."

"Sing us a song, cousin; play that lute you carry with you everywhere."

Alaric smiled and glanced down at the lute, which lay within easy reach on the floor beside the couch. "I carry it everywhere because I lost my last one by leaving it behind me. Those villagers I told you of, the ones who put Artuva in the well — they couldn't burn me, and so they burned my old lute instead."

"No need to fear that here."

"Habits stay with us long beyond their time of usefulness." He picked up the instrument, strummed a chord. "But where can I leave it with confidence? Surely not in the hall, where curious children and curious adults might accidentally damage it."

Bralion cleared his throat. "He has a room, has he not?"

"He has a room," said

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Dejarnemir. "Linda and Moiran are cleaning it and hanging fresh curtains; they promised it would be ready later tonight. You see, cousin Alaric, the House of Garlenon will not condemn you to sleep on the floor of the hall."

"I have slept in less comfortable places."

"Cousin, sing for us," she said.

He plucked a single string. "You were to teach me to be a member of the chorus."

"That can come later. Now, this moment, sing us one of your favorite songs."

"One of my favorites?"

"Yes."

He thought back, back to his days with Dall — their wanderers' life in Bedham Forest, the castle that had been their goal, the woman ... he saw her in his mind's eye as she was that first time: her green eyes, her long dark hair caught in a white lace net, her green linen gown girdled with a gold chain. He had gazed at her long, and then the king her father had asked for music.

"Upon the shore of the Northern Sea
Stands a tower of mystery,
Long abandoned, long alone,
Built of weary desert stone
For a purpose now unknown..."

As he sang, his thoughts roamed through those days, through the mornings of fumbling swordplay and the sweet afternoons with Solinde. His gathered cousins seemed to fade, their attentive faces becoming insubstantial, overlaid with scenes of memory. He hardly noticed when the song finished; his fingers continued to play over the lute strings long after his voice had ceased.

"He's a fine addition to the family," Dejarnemir said. "The Baron heard only a shadow of our new cousin's voice."

Alaric's eyes focused suddenly on his surroundings: Bralion's room, the fire, Dejarnemir at his feet. "I thank you, cousin. My mind was elsewhere for a moment, thinking of the last time I sang that song, far away, far away..."

"Not far for one of us," said Feronak.

"No, perhaps not for one of us." He glanced at Feronak, then at Bralion and Dejarnemir — they seemed to be the eldest of the group, older than he by three or four years. He wondered if any of them were married. Feronak? No, Elvala must be a mistress; one did not barter one's wife for a wager. In ten generations, Dejarnemir had said, no Garlenon had wed outside the House. Was it only custom now, or was it still the Baron's law? He wanted to ask, but not while all of them listened.

Feronak drew a pair of dice from the pocket of his tunic, sat

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back, and tossed them from hand to hand. "You have the board and pieces, I believe," he said to Bralion.

"Another game to teach our new cousin," said Bralion, and he grinned as he rose to fetch it from the cabinet on the far side of the room.

The board, a large polyhedron of inlaid diamond shapes in three different shades of wood, was laid on a low table. Small metal disks, enameled in various bright colors, were passed around, several of a single hue for each player.

"Dejarnemir always wins," said Nidida, thrusting her lower lip forward in a pout.

"You don't have to play if you don't want to," said Feronak.

Nidida placed three of her tokens on the board.

"The idea is to capture all the other pieces and to finish at the central diamond," said Bralion, and he proceeded to maneuver his own tokens and to teach Alaric the complex game of skill and chance called Kemdon, while the others played against them both in earnest.

A long time later, when he had at last begun to absorb the multitude of rules and was almost ready to continue with Bralion's assistance, Alaric was swept off the board.

"Sorry, cousin," Bralion said. "She really is quite good." Only a few moves later, he saw his own men — the last obstacles between Dejarnemir and the central diamond — eliminated.

"You need more practice," said Dejarnemir. "And a little wager would enliven the game."

"I won't bet against you, cousin."

"Nor I," added Feronak.

"Then I suppose we must find a new game I haven't yet mastered."

Bralion shrugged. "I see a great player in our new cousin. Perhaps he and I and Feronak can practice without you and manage some kind of surprise someday."

"I look forward to it."

Bralion glanced at Alaric. "She plays with the Baron when she wants a *real* challenge."

Alaric rubbed his eyes. "This is the sort of game that could last till dawn."

"Oh, there have been times," said Feronak, "when I've given our cousin Dejarnemir a race."

"You did well tonight, Feronak," she told him. "I would like to see you pitted against some of the older players."

"And what of me?" said Bralion in mock arrogance.

"You are too lazy," she said. "Come, cousins, I think our new relative would wish to be shown his bed at this time. I'll see if it's ready." She vanished, reappeared.

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"Yes, it's quite ready."

"As am I," said Alaric, stifling a yawn. "I woke early this morning."

"I'll show the way."

"Will you come back after?" asked Bralion.

Dejarnemir shrugged. "I have a few matters to look into."

"Feronak and I will be here, and whoever else wishes to stay."

Out in the corridor, she said, "You're not far from Bralion just a few doors away. The room has been unoccupied for some months, but our kind cousins have made it habitable for you; they even laid a fire."

The door was carved with winged dragons and gilded along their scales and forked tongues. Dejarnemir turned the brass handle.

"Is there a key?" asked Alaric.

"No. What lock could keep us out?"

"I mean, strangers, visitors."

"Strangers are not allowed within the Second Wall."

The room was large and luxurious: a plush green carpet covered the entire floor save for a stone crescent before the cheerfully blazing hearth; a thick blue velvet comforter hid the sheets of the wide bed; deep green curtains framed a narrow window, let in the cool night air. An upholstered divan was set by the fire, and a brass-bound trunk piled high with multicolored cushions served as a second couch.

Lying on the cushions was a familiar bundle — Alaric's bedroll. He unfolded it. His meager belongings were all there: an empty knapsack, a crust of stale bread, a cake of soap, a razor, and the sword. He lifted the sword, pulled it free of its scabbard and gazed at the blade.

"There's a fine weapon for a poor minstrel," said Dejarnemir. "Why do you not wear it instead of leaving it wrapped in your blanket?"

"A minstrel with a sword is a walking contradiction," he replied, and he propped the weapon and its sheath on the fireplace mantle. "Let us call it a trophy. My only trophy." He indicated the blank wall above the hearth. "In Bralion's bedchamber, this wall is quite crowded."

Dejarnemir smiled. "The trophies and weapons are Bralion's own. If you want a few, you'll have to hunt with him. My walls are hung with fine weaving from the south, scenes of waterfalls and forest glens, and with round plates of beaten gold cleverly embossed and inlaid with gems. There is a broad choice of ornamentation in the storerooms."

Alaric set his lute in the trunk, then relaxed on the divan, his feet propped up on cushions. "Now that

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I have a room of my own, I suppose I am an official member of the family."

Dejarnmir knelt on a large pillow on the floor, her feet tucked under the long skirt of her black and red gown. "You were a member the moment you passed the test."

"The test ... would the Baron truly have left me in that sealed room to die if I had failed?"

"Yes."

He grimaced. "That is ... grotesque."

"We must all pass the same test when we come of age to have the power."

"And the ones who fail ...?"

"They were weeded out long ago. The strain is strong now, after ten generations, and the test has been a mere formality for over a century."

"Dejarnemir, you've been bred like cattle, like dogs, for that one trait!"

She gazed serenely into the fire. "You think to revolt me by that comparison, but you do not. We know what we are, and we are proud of our heritage."

Leaning back, he studied the flickering play of shadows on the ceiling. "Now that I am a Garlenon ... will I be expected to wed within the family, too?"

She glanced at him. "Of course."

"Is there no way of avoiding it?"

"Do we all repel you so?"

"No, it isn't that."

"Then there is someone else. Perhaps ... you are married already?"

"No, I am not married. But there was a girl, a high-born girl. As a poor minstrel, I could not approach her."

"And you are thinking, a Baron's son is quite a different thing from a poor minstrel."

He turned on one elbow to look at her. "Yes."

Dejarnemir rose, walked the length of the room and stopped at the window to look out at the stars. "How long since you've seen her?"

"Two years."

"Two years is a long time. Are you sure you still want her?"

"I am sure."

"Perhaps she is wed to someone else, someone of a proper station."

"No!" His own shout startled him, and he took a deep breath before continuing in a more controlled tone. "No, I think not. She is only sixteen."

"A high-born girl, perhaps an only daughter with a sizable dowry?"

"A king's daughter."

"Ah ... they tend to marry early. Have you never attempted to find out?"

He shook his head. "I was

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exiled on pain of death for desiring her. I have never dared return."

"It would be a simple matter to steal her."

"A king's daughter deserves better."

"Better than a life at Garlenon? There is none better, as well you know, cousin. Steal her and make her your mistress."

"No, cousin. I would not offer less than marriage."

"Then you'll not have her at all."

"I'll speak to the Baron."

"He'll not give in."

"Not even for a long-lost son?"

She turned to look at him and leaned back against the windowsill. "In seventeen years, he grew accustomed to loss of a cousin. A mere cousin. Don't think that you are special, Alaric, simply because you are the fruit of his body."

"And my special knowledge?"

"It will not bend him to your whim."

"What can he do to me if I disobey?"

Her gaze lowered, fixed on the carpet. "He can make you a poor minstrel once more."

Alaric sighed.

"Life at Garlenon is sweet," Dejarnemir said softly. "But we must pay for that sweetness."

"Have you ever been in love, Dejarnemir?"

"I think so."

"With someone you could not have?"

After long hesitation, she spoke stiffly. "It is not considered good manners to question a cousin so closely about his private life."

Alaric sat up. "Forgive me, cousin. I only wondered ... what do the folk of Garlenon do when they love outsiders?"

"The men take mistresses, give them ruby pendants and red houses within the Third Wall. Occasionally a woman will find a lover in the city. But Garlenon children must be of pure blood; they must possess the power."

"And if a cousin loves no other of the family ..."

"We have our duty, cousin, our payment to the House."

"Yes," he said. "I suppose I must pay for this room, these clothes ..." His hands clenched into fists. "I am no nearer to her now than I was as a minstrel."

Dejarnemir came close to the divan, stood over him. "In two years you have not seen her, Alaric, or heard her voice. It's a memory that you love, not a woman of flesh and blood."

He looked up at her. "Perhaps there is some truth in what you say."

"Memories, dreams — they are a poor substitute for reality." She sat down on the edge of the couch. "Touch me."

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He stroked her cheek with one finger.

"No, here." She pulled his hand down to her breast. "During the game ... I stood where you had to touch me first."

"Dejarnemir —"

She pressed his fingers, trapping them with her own. "When I journey into the city, the men look at me, and not merely because I wear the Baron's colors."

"You're very pretty, I cannot deny it, but you're also my sister. I never had a sister before, but I know this is not proper ..."

She leaned close till he could feel her warm breath on his cheek. "It is proper here, cousin, quite proper." Her hands slid up along his arms and crossed behind his neck. "Surely you need no instruction in this," she whispered.

He smoothed her hair. "I know nothing of your customs, Dejarnemir. Will this bind me to you?"

She smiled. "Only as we are already bound, cousin to cousin."

"Are you married?"

"No, but neither am I a virgin, if that concerns you."

"What if ...?"

"I've borne one child to the family already; I am not afraid of another. So many questions, cousin!" She searched his face, her eyes wide. "Do you prefer that I leave?"

"No." His hand still cupped her breast; now he moved it to her waist, to her hip. "I have learned caution in these last few years, Dejarnemir; it is a habit not easily discarded."

"A valuable habit," she murmured, "under some circumstances. Will you kiss me, cousin?"

His lips met hers, gently at first, savoring the wine taste of her mouth, and then more firmly as her hands moved upon him, as their bodies, touched at full length. Briefly, he thought of Solinde, and of Mizella, and then he knew only Dejarnemir and the firelight dancing in her dark hair.

He woke, shivering, to a cold dawn filtered dimly through dense curtains. The fire had burnt out, leaving a thick bed of grey ash on the hearth. For a moment, half asleep, he could not recall where he was or who lay in his arms, her face veiled by dusky tresses; not Mizella, he was sure, nor Solinde who lived only in his dreams. Then he saw the red and black gown on the floor beside the divan.

She stirred in response to his small waking movement, and without opening her eyes she caressed his naked flesh. "The bed would be warmer," she whispered.

Under the velvet coverlet, they clung together till midmorning.

Dejarnemir stretched, arching her body into a bow. "You are different," she said. "Your ges-

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tures, your tone of voice, the way you walk. Save for that unmistakable face, I would doubt you were a Garlenon."

"And the power," said Alaric.

"The power ... could have sprung up somewhere else, just as it did in the first Baron Garlenon."

"The other proofs — the bloody hand, my age —"

"No, no. I do not mean to question your identity. But you have grown to manhood far from our influence. It is that quality ... of the foreign that attracts me so. And yet, I wonder how we will train you in our ways."

"With love."

"With discipline," she replied, and she bounded out of bed. "Come, cousin, we've missed breakfast and will have to be content with hard-cooked eggs and cold bread. What a start to your new life!"

He took her in his arms. "A fine start. I'm glad that the Baron gave me into your care."

"So am I." She kissed him quickly, then broke away. "I must bathe and change, dear cousin." She threw the red and black gown over one shoulder. "The next time you see me, it will be in something less official than this."

"Official?"

"This is a uniform. We always wear our uniforms into the city. I'll take you to the tailor later on for a fitting. When you've dressed, jump to the kitchen ... Ah, no, jump to the hall and ask directions to the kitchen. Tell them to feed you. I'll meet you there shortly." She vanished.

In the corner of the room farthest from the door, beneath a mirror of fine glass, Alaric found a stand with pitcher and bowl, soap and towels. The pitcher was full, left so, he assumed, by the cousins who had readied his room; he poured some water and splashed his face. He thought of Dejarnemir, of her slim, lithe body, her soft lips, her skilled hands. Exile could be spent in worse places than a wide bed in the wealthiest castle in the world.

"I must forget Solinde eventually, I suppose," he told his reflection. He felt a sudden weakness in his legs and clutched at the stand for support. Her face seemed to take form in the mirror, her green eyes staring out at him from the depths of the glass, staring at him with great sadness, as on the last day he had seen her. *There is no way I can have you,* he thought. *There never was.* His throat tightened. *But in two years I have not forgotten, and in my life, I vow, I never will.*

"After all," he murmured, "she doesn't expect me to return."

In the kitchen the cooks were family members, both men and

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women, all of middle age save for two apprentices studiously observing the dinner preparations. He cajoled an egg and a slice of warm raisin cake from the overseer and perched himself on an unused table to eat. Dejarnemir did arrive shortly, wearing a black and white gown of harlequin pattern that made her the most conspicuous person in the room.

"The tailor expects you imminently," she said, snatching an egg from a tray of salad garnish. "Come along."

"Where are we going? Down into the city?"

"No, no, cousin, you mustn't go into the city without a uniform. That's what we'll be getting first."

The tailor, cousin of an age to be Alaric's grandfather, lived near the gate of the Second Wall. His rooms were a shambles of racks and chests festooned with cloth and ribbon and lace, of metal pins and clips that made the bare stone floor a glinting web of silver strands. He sat in a low rocking chair by a window which looked over the courtyard, and he hummed to himself as he stitched.

"Cousin Lendel, we are here," said Dejarnemir.

He looked up, smiled, and put his work aside. "Welcome to the wanderer," he said, circling Alaric, measuring him with his eye. "Are those Bralion's shirt and hose?"

"They are, cousin," she said, "and Bralion must have them back as soon as possible."

"You have chosen a poor day, cousin." He inclined his head toward Alaric. "I assure you, cousin, my stock is not ordinarily in such a state, but a number of the ladies were here yesterday and neglected to leave things as they found them. However, I think we will be able to find a few fabrics that will please you. You have no uniform, I suppose."

"No."

"Easily rectified. Bralion's clothes fit you so well, we'll use his measurements." He searched among the litter on the table nearest his chair and found a quill, an inkpot, and a scrap of paper; he scribbled a note. "The shoulders shall be a trifle narrower, though. It will be ready tomorrow. Now, if you see anything that strikes your fancy, cousin ..."

Dejarnemir helped him select a brocade, a velvet, and a satin for tunics, silk for hose, and green leather for shoes. He refused ribbons and other ornamentation. "Too rich for me yet; I am a man of simple tastes and must approach vast wealth with a slow step."

"Whatever you wish, cousin," she said, "though I must confess I like the way you look in gold ..." She touched the chain that Bralion had hung about his neck. "I could

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find you another like this."

Alaric shook his head. "Let me pay for my food and clothes and lodging first, and later I will consider gold."

"Whatever you wish."

They bade the tailor farewell.

On the stairway, Alaric said, "I have seen cousins in the kitchen, cousins sweeping and scrubbing, and I understand that it must be so if the power is to be kept secret from the world; but cannot our clothes be made by seamstresses in the city?"

"They *are* made by seamstresses in the city. But we have always thought it best that none should know precisely how many cousins the House of Garlenon numbers, and therefore we do not go into the city to be fitted individually. Lendel measures the fabric, lays the design, and sends it out to be finished; occasionally, he sews the complete garment himself — as he did with this gown I am wearing, as he has done with much of the Baron's own clothing. He is far more expert than the city seamstresses." She looked at Alaric sidewise. "This is his means of payment, cousin. He is fortunate in loving it so well."

"He never stands guard duty?"

"No."

"Will I?"

"Almost all of the men do. But you must be trained first. You'll have a lesson this afternoon."

"A lesson in what?"

"In being a Garlenon."

The lesson began in the lowest cross-corridor within the Second Wall and was conducted by Veret, a man of middle years whose grey-shot beard and hair intensified his resemblance to the Baron. His class consisted of ten maids and youths of thirteen or fourteen, and Alaric.

"My apologies, cousin Alaric," Veret said, "if our exercises seem tedious to you. These others have only known their power a short time and must be schooled."

Alaric bowed formally. "I will endeavor to learn whatever I can, cousin."

Veret's objective was the memorization of every corner of the enclosed citadel not a private apartment: the keep, the corridors, the stairways, the common rooms. He trained the serious-faced youngsters to march in cadence, to jump in cadence, to jump on command, instantly, without even a questioning thought. He taught them to jump carrying daggers, carrying swords, carrying man-sized slabs of wood; he taught them to jump wearing voluminous cloaks without leaving a single thread behind.

"This group is doing well," he said to Alaric. "They took a heavy toll of cloth and metal before they

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learned a touch of discipline."

"They do very well," said Alaric. "I fear it will require a great deal of practice before I know the castle well enough to equal them."

"And a great deal of practice you shall have. The Baron has instructed that you come to me every afternoon until your skill is at the proper level."

"And then?"

"And then you will be assigned whatever duties the Baron pleases."

During a rest period, the youngsters played a game of buffets. Armed with padded staves, they contended by pairs while their age mates stood all around to shout encouragement. Circling, feinting, jumping without warning, they dueled. A clap of air, signaling a vanishment, would set the remaining combatant spinning like a top, in hopes of catching his opponent in that flicker of an eye before he struck from an unexpected quarter.

"You'll see the older ones do this occasionally," Veret told Alaric, "settling disputes." He raised his voice. "Very well, cousins — the lessons must resume."

Dejarnemir had gone off on errands of her own for the afternoon; she joined Alaric at the evening meal. "All that walking always exhausted me," she said. "Did he take you up to the room at the top of the keep?"

"He took me everywhere. I could jump within the Second Wall in my sleep. Do we learn the courtyard next?"

"No. Between the Second and Third Wall are some who do not belong to the family. So there we must walk and pretend to be as the rest of the world."

"They are only the various mistresses of men in the family. Surely they know all about —"

"No. Only the family knows. And Artuva."

He lifted his glass, feigning to scrutinize the gold filigree encircling it. "Artuva knows about *me*, not about the family."

She speared a steaming piece of meat with her knife and nibbled delicately at the juicy edges. "You brought her to the city with you."

"She brought me."

"Seventeen years ago, I am told, there were those who thought she should be slain for her knowledge."

"Last night the Baron seemed glad that he had spared her."

"Yes. He sent her a visitor soon after you passed the test."

He set the glass down sharply. "He did not harm her!"

"No. He merely told her that your life would be endangered by her wagging tongue. She feels very strongly toward you, cousin; she swore to tell no one about your power, not even her own sister. Apparently she has kept her own counsel these seventeen years."

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"So she told me. She traveled mostly in lands where she dared not speak of magic, and in some where even the casting of fortune sticks was looked upon with horror."

"How, then, did she live?"

"By midwifery."

"With only one hand?"

Alaric shrugged. "She lived. And she suffered. I hope she has done suffering now, cousin. I owe her a great deal."

"She owes you her life."

"She has paid me well enough. My first gold I will send to her."

"I doubt that she needs it; hers is a wealthy family."

"I thought they fell from favor because of what happened at my birth."

Dejarnemir nodded. "Their women had been our midwives for many years, and your birth marked the end of that tradition. But amassing great wealth does not really require the Baron's favor." She wiped her mouth with a lace-edged napkin. "Have you done eating, cousin?"

"I wish my belly had a greater capacity for this fine food, but, yes, I am finished."

"Good. Bralion has suggested that we begin your musical training tonight."

"Well, my body is tired; we may as well tire my voice, too."

"I'll meet you in his apartment, then."

They found him in his bedchamber, dusting a set of antlers, the largest of his trophies. "Do you enjoy hunting, cousin?" he asked.

"I am a poor marksman," said Alaric, "which is why I always depended on my voice to earn my bread."

"I wonder," said Bralion, leaning against the wall, "if you would teach me that song, the one about the tower."

"I thought this was to be *my* lesson."

"An even exchange, cousin: 'Fairy Gifts of Silver and Gold' for your song."

"I'd call it a fair exchange indeed, save that my songs sound best when accompanied by a lute, and therefore I must teach you that as well."

"Bralion plays the lute," said Dejarnemir. "Not as beautifully as you, for he'd rather string a bow, but adequately."

"I play *at* the lute," said Bralion. "Many of us do. But I don't think there's a soul in the castle that can match your skill, cousin. Our musical energies are almost entirely directed toward the chorus."

"Very well," Alaric told him. He perched on the scroll-shaped arm of a brocade chair. "Our exchange shall be this: you will train me to the chorus, and I will

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train you as a lone minstrel. Who knows — perhaps someday we two can travel foreign lands together, trading our songs for hospitality as my master Dall and I were wont to do."

Bralion frowned. "I doubt the Baron would like that. We have our responsibilities."

"The future is always an unknown, cousin. This castle could fall and we be forced to wander the world. A minstrel's life is better than a beggar's or a thief's."

"This castle will never fall!" cried Dejarnemir.

Alaric shrugged. "In my life I have learned that it is always best to be prepared for catastrophe."

Bralion took the seat opposite Alaric's. "I will learn for my own pleasure, cousin. As long as the power serves us, we need fear no catastrophe. Now the words to 'Fairy Gifts' are simple enough..."

The evening sped, and twice or thrice a cousin — not always an age mate — stopped by to have a word with Bralion. When this happened, the person did not appear in the room itself but came to the corridor outside and knocked on the door. Dejarnemir explained that this was only common courtesy, that one never jumped to another's room unless specifically invited.

He invited her, and she was not loath to accept the invitation.

Days passed, and he learned the byways of the castle, jumping in the interior and walking about in the open courtyard. He found Lightfoot well-cared for and gaining weight in a huge stable of handsome horses. Feronak introduced him to the fair Elvala, a charming young woman, pale and blonde and blue-eyed, with the longest fingernails Alaric had ever seen — he remarked upon them, and later, in private, Feronak showed the narrow red welts they had recently wrought upon his back.

Bralion schooled him in archery in one of the wider corridors of the lowest level.

"Isn't this a trifle dangerous? Alaric asked. "What if someone walked by at the wrong moment?"

Bralion laughed. "Have you not yet learned that we walk only when absolutely necessary? Don't worry, cousin. A number of us enjoy archery, and we always use this selfsame place for practice."

"I fear I shall break a good many shafts against these walls, cousin. Dall my master tried to improve my aim with little success."

Bralion laid an arm across his cousin's shoulder. "Will you yield yourself entirely to me in this matter?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall improve."

Bralion was a kind and patient teacher, setting Alaric's arms, his

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shoulders, his hands, sighting past his neck at the green target. Alaric broke a number of arrows against the walls and floor, but he hit the edge of the target once.

"I can see," said Bralion, "that we will not go boar hunting for a good many months."

"I tried to warn you of my lack of proficiency."

"Lack of practice, rather," said Bralion. "If you come here every day faithfully, you will improve. I promise it. And I'll come with you."

"If you have arrows to waste."

"We have thousands of arrows to waste, cousin. We'll go down to the storerooms for more. And we'll get you a gold chain there, too — your tunic looks too plain."

"I don't need a gold chain, cousin."

"Of course you do. I'll meet you there."

"Wait! Where?"

"In the storerooms."

"I don't know where they are."

"You don't? Ah, I suppose you wouldn't." He grinned. "Veret has forgotten that you are new to the castle. Every child knows where the storerooms are. Jump to the first cross-corridor within the First Wall."

Alaric jumped. Bralion was already there.

"You'll come here often enough when you begin your weapons training. It will be soon, I'd say, judging from Veret's reports on your progress."

"I thought I had begun today."

Bralion cleared his throat noisily. "Archery is not included in weapons training. It is merely a sport." He ambled down the hallway. "Here is the place we are looking for."

The door was of light wood, painted with a shield of the Baron's red and black arms. Beyond it, the room stretched farther than any Alaric had yet seen. To the left and right were barrels, bundles, stacks of black arrows fletched in scarlet. Against the walls stood racks of unstrung bows, and on the floor were bins of the leather pouches that protected the waxed linen strings. Armor was here, too, blazoned with the double red chevron, and bright swords with the pommels weighed by gold-set garnets. Lances, shields, suits of steel chain were hung along the walls, and large wood casks below them yielded black leather gauntlets and pennons.

Bralion selected a handful of arrows, slipped them into the quiver at his waist.

"Where are the men who use these swords and shields, and these lances?" Alaric asked. "I have seen no one with any of these things, not in the corridors, not in the courtyard."

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Bralion gestured toward the far end of the long room. "Yonder they practice in the morning, fourteen of our cousins. By their own choice, more as sport than otherwise. The Baron feels that few of us need to know the tedious martial arts of the Outlands."

"Yonder?" wondered Alaric, squinting the length of the room. "There's hardly space for combat in this clutter."

"Ah, come along," said Bralion, and he threaded his way through rank on rank of weaponry, to a plain door of iron-banded oak. He pushed it open. "The tribute of dukes and princes and kings."

A short hallway gave into a high-vaulted cavern whose ceiling dripped age-old stalactites but whose floor had been leveled and covered with thick braided rugs. Here were chests and trays and velvet bags, urns and bowls and buckets of wealth: gold chains and silver; rings, bracelets and buckles set with gems; cut crystal and white porcelain; silk, satin, and cloth of gold. Oil lamps lit the array, oil lamps that stretched as far as the eye could see, into the depths of the hill.

"The practice room is not so nicely appointed," said Bralion. "It lies some distance by foot; I doubt that you would find it interesting. Well, here is the treasure of the House of Garlenon. Will you choose a chain now that you've seen how plentiful they are?"

Alaric turned slowly to see everything. "This is the plunder of centuries," he said.

"Another reason among many for allowing no strangers inside the Second Wall." He selected a gold chain with a ruby pendant, hefted it thoughtfully. "If ever you wish to take a mistress from the city or elsewhere, it is our custom to give the woman one of these and a red house within the Third Wall." He slipped the bauble into his quiver.

"Dejarnemir told me," said Alaric, gazing upward, estimating the distance to the roof. "We are actually inside the hill itself. How far does the cavern extend?"

"Quite far. I didn't think Dejarnemir would be so free with such information quite so soon. It seemed to me that she had her eye on you."

"Has it been fully explored, are there outlets besides this one?"

"What we use has been explored. Beyond that ... there are many branching passageways, twists and turns that could bewilder even a Garlenon. The Baron says there is a lake at the bottom."

"Sometime ... I should like to see it."

Bralion shrugged. "I've heard it is a very, very, very long walk."

"But one would not be required to walk *back*."

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"I'd rather hunt boar."

Alaric laughed. "Coming here all your life has spoiled you, cousin. The largest cave *I* ever saw before this day was an old bear den where I couldn't stand upright."

"Well, perhaps you could induce a few of the younger cousins to go with you. Don't go alone. The Baron has warned us strongly against roaming the caverns alone. In my great-grandsire's time a lone cousin was lost here, in spite of his power. They found the skeleton many years later."

"A grisly tale indeed. Well, there will be time and time to explore in future."

"This would look well on you," Bralion said, choosing a chain of gold and silver filigress ovals.

"I don't want it, cousin."

"Take it as my gift."

"What have I done to deserve it? I should be the one to gift *you*."

"Then take it as from Dejarnemir. Surely you've done something for *her*." He grinned. "She'd like to see you in a bit of wealth, cousin; gold attracts the ladies so ..."

Alaric gazed about at the treasure of the Garlenons. Its value was beyond estimate, beyond the worth of the whole of Royale, castle, country, and inhabitants. "Very well, cousin," he said, "since you have so much ..."

Bralion tossed the chain; it whirled in the air and slipped neatly over Alaric's head. "There's another sport I could teach you," he said, and they clapped shoulders, laughing together.

Dejarnemir shared Alaric's bed that night, and she smiled at Bralion's selection. "I have one like it, as well he knows. This is his way of giving approval."

"Approval of what?"

"Of whatever you and I might have in mind."

He rose on one elbow, looked down into her face. "What have you in mind, cousin?"

"At this moment, you." Her arms locked behind his back and pulled him close.

Veret soon considered his students ready for weapons training. "You may have watched some of your older cousins bashing each other with sword and mace, carrying about vast weights of armor and much-dented shields, and you may have thought that this sort of recreation might be amusing. In my opinion, it is not. In my opinion, it requires unnecessary exertion and is as likely as not to injure *all* parties involved. If you should care to train in such a pastime, you must petition one of those who already practice the art — though it is hardly worthy of *that* title. From me, you will learn the Garlenon

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mode of combat — as swift and sure as the flight of an eagle. You will begin by drawing your daggers."

Every young cousin's belt bore a blade with hilt inlaid with gold or gems that flashed in the light of the oil lamps.

"As I call your names, you will jump to the common room in the fourth cross-corridor. There you will find a sack of cloth scraps roughly shaped like a man. You will stab it as if it were alive and then return here with all haste. I will be observing your every move."

At random, he called their names, and as the youngsters vanished, he vanished, too.

So this is the army of Garlenon, Alaric thought. *Trained to come and go in an eyeblink, trained to pick off one opponent at a time, with no chance of harm to themselves.* He wondered how many years were required to make their maneuvers instinctive. *Even the girls.*

He kept pace, remembering all the while Artuva's tale of the siege of the castle in her grandmother's day: the enemy had fled after three nights of terror. Terror it would be indeed to be attacked by the hosts of Garlenon.

The youngsters learned their lessons thoroughly, stabbing sacks of cloth with great fervor.

"These are not men," said Veret. "We have no men to waste on your weapons training. I now substitute the carcass of a hog for the sack. It is in the common room in the third cross-corridor. Alaric."

Alaric jumped, found the carcass still warm from slaughter and bleeding only a little from the wound at the jugular. He stabbed it to the heart, felt the knife slip between two ribs in a manner wholly unlike the penetration of a bale of cloth. This sensation was unexpected after so much of the other, but not unfamiliar — he had dressed out game often enough in his wandering life. He jumped back to the group.

"Good" said Veret, and he called the next name.

Reluctantly, Alaric wiped his knife on a linen kerchief; he hated to spoil the fabric, but he hated more to leave his knife stained — his own knife, plain-hilted and nicked with use. He waited, alert, as Veret marked the rest of the group, vanishing with each to look over his shoulder. It seemed to Alaric that several of the youngsters took longer than necessary to complete their tasks.

Veret stood, arms akimbo, after everyone had stabbed the hog. "Some of you have never worked in the kitchen," he said. "Which ones?"

Three of the boys and one of the girls stepped forward, as did Alaric,

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but Veret waved him back.

"Today after your lessons, you four will report to the cook and ask to be assigned to slaughtering. You must learn to strike swiftly, without flinching. To all of you, I say, this hog is not a man. But just as a hog struggles at the slaughter, so does a man, and a man usually has weapons at his disposal, and comrades in arms. You must strike swiftly, you must be gone before anyone knows you have been present. Those of you who do not heed my advice will surely die."

"We could wear armor," said one of the boys, echoing aloud the thought that arose in Alaric's brain.

"Armor makes noise, even on the most graceful dancer. Our art requires silence. If you wish to wear armor, you are free to do so, but you will find it less a help than a hindrance. That is all for today."

Alaric invited Bralion and Feronak to his room that evening. He passed a flagon of wine and, without preamble, he said, "I have never killed a man. Has either of you?"

Bralion's eyebrows lifted. "Ah, so Veret stole his usual hog from the kitchen today!"

"Yes."

"Killing a hog is not like killing a man," said Feronak. "We ought to take slaves from some of the recent conquests — the ones that caused us trouble — and give the children some real practice."

"Our cousin is just a trifle bloodthirsty today," Bralion said to Alaric. "The Baron has said he must return to the south for a conversation with the vassal who lords our favorite vineyard. Life is not as quiet there as it might be."

"He needs another lesson," said Feronak, frowning. "This time I won't bother coddling the boy."

"He left him hanging upside down from the highest branch of the tallest tree in the valley," said Bralion. "The boy's father must have had an exciting time bringing him down."

"Not half as exciting as he will this time, I vow."

"Cousins," said Alaric, "I asked —"

"Yes, of course I have!" said Feronak. "And so will you, once you've learned the knack of it."

Bralion pursed his lips, looked into his wine glass, and drank.

"I'm surprised you've lived so long without doing so before now," said Feronak.

Alaric turned his back to them, gazed into the fire. "There was a day ... a moment ... when I would have slain my master's killers. But there were two of them, and I was afraid. As a minstrel, I lived a peaceful life, attempting to give offense to no man." He lifted his

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eyes to the sword and its finely tooled leather scabbard, no longer representing wealth to a mind dazzled by gold ... but still rich in memories. The blade bore a shallow nick where Trif the innkeeper had beaten his own blade against it. "I have always run away from danger. And now the House of Garlenon, my own house, asks me to change myself."

"We run away," said Bralion. "We are cowards one and all, afraid of death, and the power is our shield."

"Cousin!" cried Feronak, rising from his chair. "Those are ugly words!"

"But true ones nonetheless. Have you ever faced death, cousin? I have not, and I've killed my share of men. We are mighty because we run away. The power makes weakness our strength. Without it, we'd still be stewards in some great man's castle, as the first Baron Garlenon was. He killed his master to gain a coronet — and not in a fair fight. We Garlenon never fight fair."

Feronak shook his head. "Sometimes I don't know why the Baron tolerates you, cousin. Your mood is foul tonight."

"As is yours. Why shouldn't the Baron tolerate me? He knows my obedience is beyond question. But I know what we are, cousin; I won't lie to myself." He spoke to Alaric. "You can ask to be set free of weapons training if you can find some other sort of task you do well."

"Like the tailor?" murmured Alaric.

"Yes."

Alaric shook his head. "I sing and play the lute. I see little point in offering those as alternatives."

"Then you must change yourself," said Feronak.

"Then you must change yourself," said Bralion.

In silent agreement, they dropped the subject and jumped to Bralion's room for a game of Kemdon.

On bright afternoons, after training, Alaric sometimes walked out in the city. He wore his red and black uniform then — it was a rule of the House that no one went abroad without the uniform, not even the small children. Citizens shied away from him, jostling each other in their efforts to let him move unobstructed; where the streets had been near impassable to a bedraggled young minstrel, they were now a narrow private highway to the man who wore two chevrons on a field of black.

Often, he passed the inn where he had spent so many hours after being turned away from the castle. Once, he entered and ordered wine; the landlord did not seem to

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recognize him, nor did the grizzled old man who had engaged him in conversation on that long-gone day. Alaric greeted them both with lifted cup, but they returned his greeting with respectful bows and respectful distance; when he stared straight into their eyes, their gazes slid away from his face, to the floor, to the wall, to another person. He wondered if they saw his face at all and not just the uniform. The atmosphere of the inn was not as he remembered it — the clientele had quieted abruptly when he arrived. He finished his wine and left quickly.

The courtyard was always cool — shaded by the high Third Wall — no matter how hot the day. Alaric sat in the grass beneath a tree and reviewed his latest stroll through the city — he thought he knew the place well enough now that he could jump almost anywhere in it. Jumping was, of course, prohibited there, but he had a craving for knowledge of his surroundings, in case such knowledge were ever, for any remote reason, necessary. And the city itself was fascinating, teeming with vendors, craftsmen, fortunetellers, tambourine dancers, beggars dressed finer than many a rich man in another land, and travelers from beyond the horizon come with trbiute for the Baron and tales of adventure for any who would listen. Sometimes these last did not notice the uniform, or perceive its meaning, for a long time.

Alaric was thinking quite seriously of questioning the rule about uniforms; Dejarnemir explained that it had a threefold purpose: first, to identify and command the respect due the House of Garlenon; second, to keep the citizenry and the world at large from knowing how many members the House numbered (the great family resemblance precluded exact identification of any family member by an outsider); and third, to protect the wearer from the fruits of any anger he might provoke by his actions in the city — the children in particular were safe from citizen retribution for the frequent mischief they wrought among the flowers, animals, and children of the city (a habit their elders disapproved of but could not entirely discourage).

Alaric cared nothing for the respect due him as a Garlenon, thought he could roam freely as he had arrived — a minstrel — and had no fear for his personal safety in that guise. He was thinking of speaking to the Baron about the matter when a woman approached his tree.

"Hello, Alaric."

He lifted his eyes from the ground-sweeping green skirt to the low-cut bodice and the ruby

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pendant displayed against bare flesh. An outsider, someone's mistress. The face was framed by dark hair.

Mizella.

"May I sit down?" she said.

He nodded, mute.

"You had not expected to see me here, I suppose."

"How long, Mizella, and ... and who?"

"His name is Merevan."

An older cousin, Alaric thought, one he knew but slightly.

"He came to the house to speak to Artuva the same day you left. He saw me, and the next day he came back. He was kind, well-mannered, really quite amusing. Not long after, he offered me this." She fingered the pendant. "I didn't want to accept it. It seemed such a great gift. I didn't know, then, what it meant. He offered again ... and I said yes. The next day a litter came to take me to the castle, and now I have my own red house and all the clothes and jewels I ever desired." She smiled. "Far more than I had expected."

"You're pleased, then?"

"Yes. He's very nice, Alaric. And ... he reminds me of you. Older, but still ..." She folded her hands in her lap. "How have you been, Alaric?"

"Well. Quite well."

"I see you're one of them." She touched the chevron on his chest.

"Yes. There was never any real doubt.'"

"You've seen your parents."

"Yes, though not very often."

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "They have it, don't they? They all have it?"

"Have what?"

"You know what I mean. I've heard the wild tales that the people in the city tell each other. The truth seems to be a well-kept secret — Merevan gave Artuva to believe that your life depended on her silence, but I think it's just that they don't want the truth to leak out."

"And your part in my return — what does Merevan know of it?"

"Nothing, I think. Artuva told him I was a recent companion, almost a stranger to you, that I was not a party to the secret."

"Then you must never tell him the truth," he murmured. "Nor anyone else."

"I won't. But Alaric ... I'm glad you've found your own folk."

"Are you happy, Mizella? Is Merevan good to you?"

"Yes and yes."

"Do you love him?"

She shrugged. "I enjoy being with him, and he gives me anything I want. I'm luckier than most, Alaric — being barren, I'll never have to give up a child for him."

"Give up a child?"

"You must know that the

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children born inside the Third Wall are taken from their mothers."

"No, I didn't know that. What happens to them?"

"No one knows. Some say they're raised in the castle and taught their father's arts."

Alaric plucked a blade of grass, began to shred it with his fingernails. "The Baron has his rules. Those children would inherit the power; the secret would be out if they were left with their mothers."

"Does it really matter if the secret is out? Would that make the House of Garlenon any less powerful?"

"Mizella, we must not be overheard discussing such matters."

"Come to my house, then, and we can talk freely."

He shook his head. "It wouldn't be proper. I'll leave you now, Mizella, lest anyone think we are more friendly than we should be." He rose, offered a hand to help her up. "You *are* happy, aren't you?"

"Don't feel guilty about me, Alaric. I'm fine. Come visit me sometime. Bring a chaperon if you like." She smiled, let go his hand, and strolled away toward a table where three women sat over a game board.

He turned from her but saw her still in his mind's eye, and the past she represented. He had not thought of her for a long time, nor of his life before coming to Castle Garlenon. He had allowed Bralion and Feronak and Veret and Dejarnemir to fill his idle moments, especially Dejarnemir, her eyes and lips and arms. His days brimmed with new experiences, with sights and sounds and tastes, with lessons and games and dalliance, but his heart was empty. What he felt for Dejarnemir, he scarcely knew, but it was a pale thing beside his love for Solinde.

He waited long that evening in the corridor outside the Baron's private apartments, and at last, after countless cousins had passed in and out, he was admitted.

"Sit down, Alaric," said his liege lord. Swathed in a dressing gown of deepest purple velvet, he reclined on a gold brocade divan. At his elbow, a crystalline decanter betrayed pale amber contents; he lifted it in a cordial gesture. "Have a cup of wine. Veret tells me your progress is swift."

Alaric knelt on a plush footstool. "My lord, I am here to speak to you of matters pertaining to my future."

"Yes?" The Baron poured a tumbler of wine and proffered it.

Accepting the glass, Alaric drank to moisten his suddenly dry throat. "Matters which, I have

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been told, concern the House as well as myself."

"Your future and the House's future are one."

"I have been among you some time now. I have looked and listened; I've been given a great deal of advice. But there is something I must hear from your own lips, my lord."

"And that is ..."

"Whom must I marry?"

The Baron smiled. "You need not marry at all if you do not desire it."

"No, lord, that is not what I mean."

"You ask, then, if I have chosen your bride?"

"It is a fair question, lord."

"It is, indeed. Come back five years hence and ask again. You are too young to think of marriage."

Alaric drank once more and stared deep into the glass. "I have thought of it often."

"Have you?" The Baron's eyebrows rose. "And whom would *you* choose?"

"Of all the women in the world..." He sighed, then straightened his shoulders and lifted his gaze to the Baron's face. "My lord, this is a time for plain speaking; must I wed within the House? I have been told this is the Baron's law, that none have disobeyed in ten generations."

"That is so."

"And I, too, must yield to it?"

"You must." The Baron smiled again. "But if you want her so much, an arrangement can be made for a red house in the courtyard."

Alaric looked down at the glass again, turned it slowly in his hands, and the lamplight flickered over its faceted sides. "I know. But she would never be allowed inside the Second Wall. She would be an outsider, a concubine, without position or title. Her family is noble ... royal; they would never tolerate it."

"They could not prevent it."

"Dejarnemir thought the same." He rose from his footstool, set his glass beside the decanter, and bowed. "Thank you, lord, for allowing me this audience. My questions have been answered."

"Will you fetch her here, then?"

"No, lord. I'll leave her where she is. Good night."

He brooded some while, sitting by the fire in his room, torturing himself with visions of Solinde; and the greatest torture was the thought that if he went back to her for whatever reason, with whatever purpose, she might not remember him at all. Two years had slipped away, and in two years the world might turn upside down. For Alaric, it had done so indeed. When at last, in the dawn twilight,

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Dejarnemir knocked at his door, he was more than ready to forget the past with her.

Not many days afterward, the future enveloped him unexpectedly. He jumped to the hall for the regular evening session of choral song. His age mates were there already, and the usual crowd of cousins, waiting to begin.

"I see I'm not late," he said to Dejarnemir, who sat with Bralion and the others at their table.

"Not for singing," she said. "That's going to be delayed. The Baron has some announcement to make."

"I think we're involved," said Bralion.

"Us?" said Alaric. "Have we done something?"

"We will. Better sharpen your knife."

The Baron stood behind his table, the Baroness to his left, the heir to his right. "Cousins!" he shouted, and the tumult of the throng ceased. "Cousins, the fortress at Brisenthal is besieged. Tomorrow, forty of us ride to save it. Let the following cousins take seats before me and be instructed."

"You see?" said Bralion when his name was called.

Alaric, Feronak, and Dejarnemir were also included.

"Women?" wondered Alaric, and he thought of the girls who were training under Veret.

"We are soldiers, too," said Dejarnemir.

The cousin in charge of the fortress at Brisenthal had jumped to Garlenon that afternoon to report the siege. Eight other cousins knew the route; they would guide their thirty-two companions on horseback. Five days of hard riding would bring them to a base some miles from the fortress. The plan of attack was simple: they would scout the besiegers' camp, jumping as near as possible, hiding behind trees and in bushes; they would locate all captains, their campfires, their tents, their beds; at midnight, they would jump to those beds, slay, and vanish. It was a well-worn plan that had never yet failed.

The forty were broken up into eight squads, each commanded by an older cousin of substantial experience. Alaric's commander was Veret himself. Bralion, Feronak, and Dejarnemir were on other squads.

"If all goes well," said the Baron, "our work will be over by this hour six days hence."

Alaric meditated through supper. He had never killed a man. He doubted he could bring himself to do so now. After the meal, he confided in Veret.

"The Baron says you must be blooded," Veret said. He clapped Alaric on the back. "There is

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nothing to be afraid of, you know. A Garlenon cannot be killed unless he's surprised, and in the middle of the night surprise will be on your side. Strike true and hard, then jump back to your base. For Garlenon, lad, remember that always."

Feronak and Bralion were gone when he turned to search for them. Dejarnemir caught his arm. "May I come to your room?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Now."

He nodded, and a moment later they were both there.

She kindled a fire in the hearth. "You wondered what use that plain brown suit of clothes was that the tailor sent with the rest of your wardrobe."

"And you told me I'd find out eventually. And so I have. I wear it tomorrow. I hide in bushes or behind a tree in it. Ah, Dejarnemir!" He took her in his arms. "Must it be so soon? My training seems inadequate to the task."

"You'll do well, cousin. The Baron would not have chosen you for the trip if he had no confidence in you."

He loosed her long enough to lead her to the couch, and when they sat down he held her close. "What is Brisenthal, where, of what value? Who is besieging it and why?"

"I cannot answer all those questions, cousin. Lie back, put your head in my lap and relax." She stroked his hair. "Brisenthal is in the south, farther — much farther — then the petty fiefdom that Feronak bullies for wine. Brisenthal is on the very edge of the realm and vulnerable, you see, to attacks from the southern Outlands. We should have taken them ere this, but we delayed, and now one of them has made the first move against us. Eliander is the fellow's name — a count or somesuch, I'm not really sure. He besieges Brisenthal thinking he can beat us back; he disbelieves in our might. Now we must teach him to respect us."

"But *why* is he attacking? How can he hope to defeat a realm as far-flung and powerful as this?"

"He is attacking because he doesn't wish to pay us tribute. We had asked for a small sum, something he could easily afford, and he refused. I cannot guess why he thinks he can defeat us."

Alaric sat up. "Garlenon has been planning on conquering this Eliander's country?"

"Yes, but we've been busy elsewhere lately."

"Why don't we just leave him alone?"

"But cousin, he besieges Brisenthal. We cannot allow that!"

"Can't we come to some sort of

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agreement that would be satisfactory to both sides?"

Dejarnemir smiled. "Why should we? He will lose his country and his life, and we won't lose a single man."

Alaric leaned forward, elbows on his knees, chin propped up on his interlaced fingers. "How long ago did Brisenthal belong to someone else?"

She shrugged. "We acquired it when I was a child."

"And the rest — all conquered, I assume."

"Of course. Everything in this world is won by conquest."

"I think I begin to understand Bralion. Will it go on forever, Dejarnemir, beyond our lives, beyond our children's lives, till Garlenon rules the whole world?"

"Why not, cousin? That is a worthy dream for lords of power such as we."

"We must breed quickly, then; it will take a vast number of Garlenons to rule the world."

"Well, I am doing my share."

He straightened, turned to face her. "You're pregnant?"

"Probably."

He gripped her shoulder. "Then you must not go tomorrow!"

"I'll go."

"Too dangerous, Dejarnemir!"

"Nonsense. There won't be any danger at all. I've done this before. Several times."

"But not when you were pregenant?"

"No, but I'm not ill. I feel quite healthy."

"Does the Baron know?"

"No, and you shan't tell him. I'm not certain anyway. It's very soon to be certain. I merely suspect."

He looked into her eyes. "Is it my child?"

She returned his gaze levelly. "Yes."

He hugged her. "As the father of your child, I command you to stay here tomorrow."

"You may not command me, cousin. I will do as I like. And if you tell the Baron, I will deny it."

"You *want* to go?"

"Of course. I am a Garlenon and I do as my lord bids."

"How well-trained you all are!" He shook his head. "I have not been here long enough, Dejarnemir. I'm an outsider, far more than the children of the women in the red houses that you train from babyhood to be part of the family."

She stiffened in his arms, drew back a little. "Who told you that we take children from the women of the red houses and bring them into the family?"

"A woman in the courtyard," he said. "She spoke to me and the conversation turned to children."

"She was wrong," said Dejarnemir.

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"In what way?"

"I told you we were a pure strain, cousin. Quite pure. No half-outsider has been allowed in the family."

"But they *are* Garlenon children. What happens to them?"

She looked toward the fire. "They probably would not pass the test anyway."

"Then ..."

"If the women have assumed the children are taken into the family, that is their foolishness. We make no promises."

"I see; they are killed."

"What is an outsider child? There are many such in the world."

Alaric leaned back, let his arms drop away from her. "I should have realized that only Garlenon is important."

"The women are warned that they cannot keep their babes. No one forces them to become mistresses of Garlenon men. They come to the red houses of their own free will."

He thought of Mizella and the two children she had abandoned because they were an inconvenience to her livelihood. He thought of the guilt and sorrow that plagued her memories. "It seems a high price. Do they lie to themselves because it is too high?"

"I am not lord of the House, cousin," she said softly, laying an arm across his shoulders. "Whatever I may think is not significant. I am a soldier, as you are. We must follow our lord's orders. Tomorrow, Alaric."

"Tomorrow." He gazed into the crackling flames. "I never thought to be a soldier." He looked up at the sword. "When Prince Jeris gave me that sword, he said I could sell it if I needed the money. Even he, who practiced single combat beside me in the courtyard of his father's castle, never expected me to become a soldier." He shook his head. "Am I truly home?"

"You're tired, cousin. Come rest beside me."

He let her lead him to the bed, and there he clung to her with his eyes closed. Later, he dreamed of blood.

He woke groggily when the quilts were ripped away and a dozen hands grabbed him roughly. For an instant, in the dim light of fading embers, he saw shadowy figures surrounding him, and then he was engulfed in chilly blackness. He reached out, clutched at emptiness, encountered a cold stone wall. Only his own breathing marred the silence.

He knew what had happened. Bralion was tolerated, his doubts outweighed by his innate loyalty to the family, but Alaric was an outsider, an unknown, full of

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questions and quibbles — he knew another way of life and could not be trusted to obey blindly. Fortunately, Alaric was a fool who would never suspect that his family might rid itself of him as easily as of a newborn babe or an enemy count.

Dejarnemir, perhaps, had betrayed him, or Bralion or Feronak, but no more than he had betrayed himself.

A group of them had jumped in cadence with him as their cargo — jumped to a cold, dark place that he had never seen. For the first time in his life, Alaric was trapped.

Already, he was feeling short of breath. It must be a small, tightly enclosed area, and the only fresh air it contained was that which the jumpers had brought in with their bodies. How long, he wondered, would it last?

He traced the outlines of his prison: four irregular stone walls encompassing a space not much greater in any dimension than the length of his body. In one corner he encountered bones — the previous inhabitant. He shuddered, felt his stomach crawling up his throat; that some earlier prisoner perished here hardly boded well for this one.

Four blank walls, a blank floor, blank ceiling. He pounded on them with all his strength, and the sound indicated solid stone. That seemed unreasonable. In order to jump into this space, the Garlenons who had stolen him from his bed must have walked into it at some earlier time. One of the walls, at least, had to be artificial, brick or stone blocks sealed by mortar, pitch, or plaster. Closing his eyes for concentration, Alaric ran his fingertips across the face of each wall.

He breathed shallowly. An ache had begun in the back of his head, and his body felt heavy, as if he had run miles and were about to collapse from exhaustion. He wanted to lie down and rest for a moment, to lay his aching head on the icy floor, but he knew he dared not. Sleep would be the end of him; his would be the second skeleton in this tiny chamber. He wondered if there had ever been others.

He shook his head and opened his eyes to stare into the darkness — he felt less tired that way.

A cursory examination of each wall revealed nothing to his probing fingers. He swept over them again, more carefully, and found nothing but seamless natural stone.

His arms were heavy, he could hardly lift them, and fighting the lethargy, he made a vast effort to stretch them above his head. His knuckles hit the ceiling while his elbows were still bent. Furious, he pushed upward, bracing his legs apart, till his body was as taut as a bow and sweat trickled down his

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cheeks to chill him. He screamed, and his voice was deafening in his own ears. The darkness turned about him, as if he were once more playing Blind Man with his age mates; he could almost conjure up Dejarnemir to stand before his sightless eyes.

He fell over, and the sharp pain of his naked knees striking the unyielding floor cleared his head. He stood upright, touched the ceiling again, sliding his fingers across the stone. Where wall and ceiling met, his nails found cracks — his prison was a pit cut in solid rock, topped by a single slab. Twenty or thirty men could lift that cover, but one lone man would die beneath it.

His laboring lungs drew breath but found no sustenance. He guessed at the thickness of the ceiling, doubled his guess.

And jumped.

His bare feet hit rock with a bone-jarring impact, and he pitched forward. He had overestimated and appeared in midair. Darkness still surrounded him, but he knew by the freshness of the air that he was outside his tomb. He lay on the cold stone and breathed deeply.

At last, shivering, he climbed to his feet and turned slowly, straining without success to pierce the blackness. He stretched his arms out to either side and brushed no obstacles. He stepped forward, testing the ground gingerly with his nearly numb toes. He had not moved more than a few paces when he encountered an abrupt elevation in the floor — the base of a stalagmite that rose and tapered to form an hourglass with a stalactite depending from overhead. After Alaric had felt of the formation, he needed no further proof that he was deep inside the hill, in the caverns.

He assumed the storerooms were near. He had no rational reason to do so, for adequate torchlight would facilitate short exploratory jumps, making any subterranean distance an easy hike for a Garlenon, but he made the assumption anyway for his peace of mind. He knew he could not walk far; he was totally naked, without any means of building a fire, and he could feel the numbnesss creeping past his ankles. He could not jump to warmth and safety, for he knew not where they lay. That he had jumped out of his prison to a destination calculated but unknown to direct experience astounded him — he was sure no other Garlenon could do the same, and the skeleton he had left behind was weighty evidence of that. But jumping out of the cavern entirely was another matter; how far and in what direction lay safety? He could not even guess.

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And he was afraid to try.

The rough floor slanted neither up nor down. From the echoes of his experimental whispers, Alaric judged he was in a large room. He searched for a wall, found one, and moved along it, following every twist and turn. The floor made a sudden steep angle downward, then up; the wall fell away to the left, then surrounded him, alcove-like, and turned him back the way he had come. He plodded ahead, scouting every step by touch; he wanted to crawl on hands and knees, but every bit of him that touched the chilling stone meant more of his body heat flowing away. His calves were numb now; he couldn't feel his lower legs at all. He thought he was moving upward, but in the cold darkness his sense of direction and his sense of balance were both ebbing. He stumbled, sprawled, scrambled to his feet and bumped his head on the wall. He ran in place for a little while, trying to beat life back into his legs, and when he was a trifle warmer, he resumed his trek. His teeth were chattering violently, and the bumps that had long since raised on his skin were thousands of tiny points of pain.

How long he wandered, he did not know. Was it morning already? Not a speck of light appeared to assuage the gloom. His stomach rumbled. His bladder begged relief, and he emptied it into the darkness. Somewhere above him, he was certain, the House of Garlenon was eating breakfast.

His forward foot skidded on something hard and cold and detached from the floor, but it was not a rock. Alaric stumbled, grabbed at the wall and saved his balance; then he bent to search for the object. His numb fingers awkwardly felt of a long hollow cylinder of metal, tapering to a point, rough-surfaced with rust — a torch holder intended for wall mounting.

He was on a trail that other human beings had used.

He dropped the torch holder and moved on, his left hand high now, sweeping the wall for other mounts. He found one where the wall turned at a sharp angle, another farther on, and then he stumbled again, this time over a rusty metal chest. The chest was empty, its lid flung back and hanging on a single hinge. Farther on, a second chest stood against the wall, also open, empty, and perforated by rust. Farther, there was litter underfoot almost constantly; old swords, a few dented shields, some pieces of armor, and other objects whose identity had been lost through years of slow disintegration.

Alaric wanted to cry out for joy, but he feared they might hear him.

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He felt the breeze. Light, evanescent, a mere breath across his trembling body. A cold breath. It blew from his back.

He turned, felt the breeze more strongly, for he had suddenly begun to sweat. He *knew* there was no way out behind, not for miles. He shivered more violently than ever and slapped himself for warmth. He thought of the hot summer sun that must have risen long since, the sun he had often tried to escape by lolling in the shade of the Third Wall. How could this cold breeze come from the hot sun? He sniffed at it and smelled no greenery, no dust of summer roads, only the cold and the damp. This was a breeze from the depths of the earth.

He could not turn back. Therefore, he must believe that as the breeze had an entrance to the caverns in the depths of the earth, so it had an exit into the sunlight. He resumed his walk.

His mind had long since begun conjuring sparks from the darkness, worms of light that flashed across his eyeballs and disappeared when he turned his head to follow them, fountains of color, glowing balls, sheet lightning. These lamps illuminated none of his surroundings, not even the wall beside his hand, and he became slowly accustomed to ignoring them. Now he saw a dim light far ahead, much like a number of dim lights that he had observed during his time of dark solitude. Previously, he had rejoiced and quickened his pace, only to see the brightness fade at his approach and be snuffed out like a guttering candle. This time he sighed and moved on at his customary pace or perhaps a bit slower, for his legs, which had long been without feeling, were nearly without strength as well. He continued to knock into objects, but now he did not stop to examine them. It sufficed that they were there, mute guideposts, discarded against one wall of a long corridor ... or a series of rooms — Alaric had ceased his attempts to locate the opposite wall.

He walked with his head down, morbidly certain that when he looked up again the light would be gone. He saw the texture of the floor change before his numb feet felt it, and only then did he comprehend that he could see once more.

He ran, he stumbled, fell to the carpet, and ran again. He stopped when he realized he saw not the lamplight of the storerooms but sunlight streaming through slitted windows high overhead, illuminating a large round room built of stone by man. His entrance stirred up dust that floated, winking golden, in the sunshine.

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He looked around, blinking, his mind fuzzy with exhaustion, his body still trembling with cold and the aftermath of fear. He saw walls partially covered by dusty, rotting tapestries. He saw a broad archway sealed by a lowered portcullis and, immediately beyond, bricks. He saw a stone staircase that circled the room, spiraling upward, passing beneath a matching spiral of windows. He went to the staircase, started up, found himself crawling on hands and knees. The stone of the stairs was neither warm nor cold to his limbs.

At the first window he pulled himself upright to look out.

Low sunlight, but warm. He had been underground a full day. He leaned against the sill and let its stored warmth seep into his flesh. The city spread out before him. He was in the Castle Under the Hill.

Heedless of risk, he jumped to his bedchamber and found no one there, not even those who might be expected to linger for memory's sake. He stripped the bed, dug through the brass-bound chest, and made a bundle of his plainest castle clothes and two blankets, the sword and the lute. With fingers still half frozen, he donned and laced his old minstrel's garments. Without a qualm, he flitted to the storeroom, secured a pouch of the Baron's gold, and returned to his room. Lightfoot, he feared, would have to be left behind.

Hoisting the pack to his shoulder, he made his silent farewells in the empty room, to Bralion and Dejarnemir, to Mizella and Artuva, to father and mother and birthplace. Then he jumped to a lonely grove of trees a few days' journey eastward. On a mossy spot between the gnarled roots of a large and venerable oak, he spread his pallet for the coming night. In the morning, he would move north, without horse or human comrade, a lute and a sword his only companions. Once again, he was merely a minstrel — not a baron's son, nor a lord of power, but a wandering exile.

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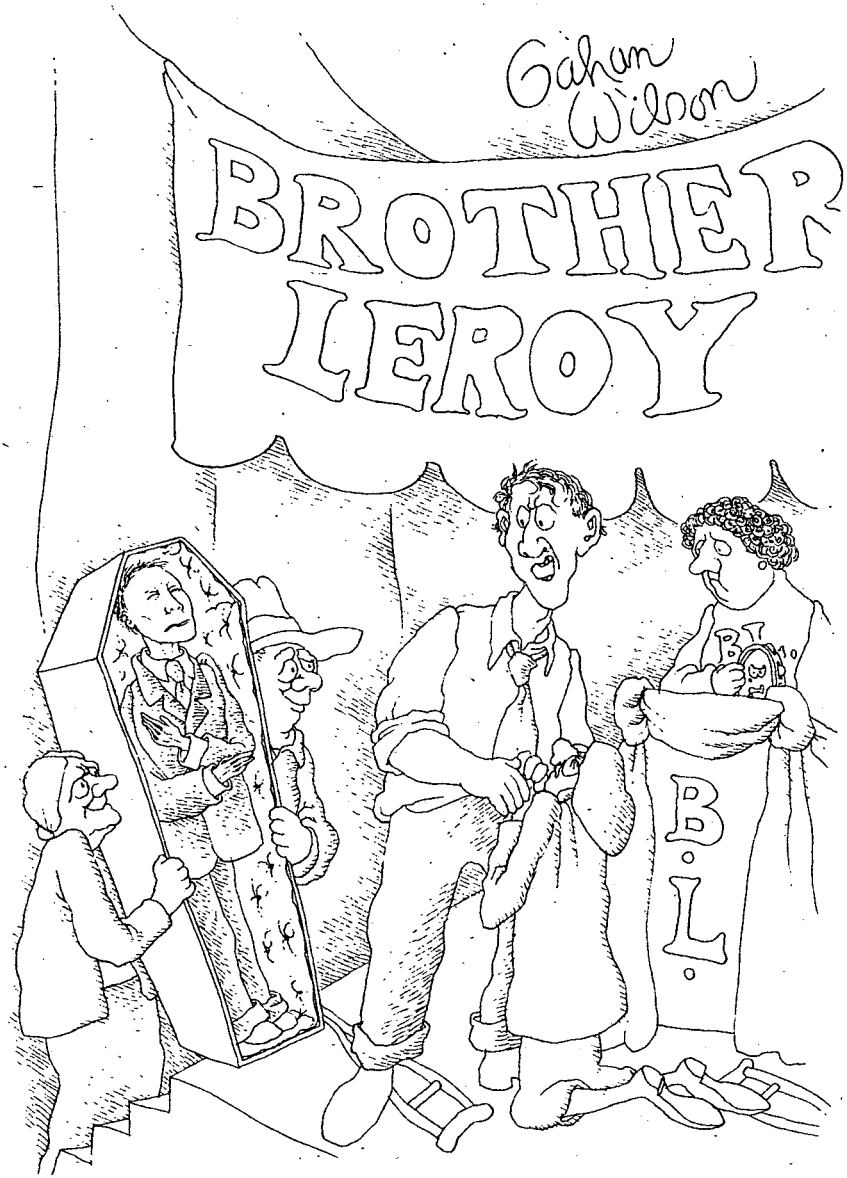

"Now just a goddamn minute!"

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THE DARK CORNER

Common sense is rightly cherished. It makes us view the advice of lawyers and financial advisers with suspicion, leads us to be cynical concerning the claims of all advertisers, causes us to waste no time in demanding a second opinion when serious illness is spoken of, and otherwise mightily helps us steer our perilous course through this confusing and often downright wicked world.

But common sense is also the prime bane to all who would write fantastic literature. Any author, wishing his ghost to walk, must first of all devise some way to fuddle or buy off this intrepid guardian, or his project is doomed. Common sense believes in hard realities, and absolutely nothing else. It steps on Leprechauns with contempt and squishes them; it slams the door on approaching vampires, breaking their noses.

One way of leading this mentor firmly down the garden path is to construct a world and a people of such obvious authenticity that the apparitions and wonders intermingled with them will also seem to be similarly sound. In *Collected Ghost Stories of Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman*, one of the best of the naturalistic school of New England writers demonstrates her complete

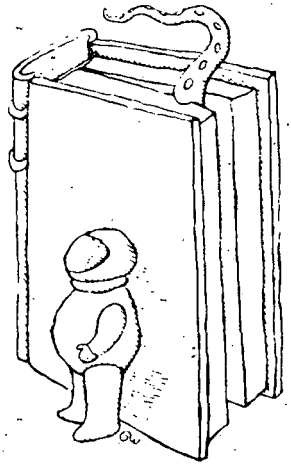
GAHAN WILSON

Books

Collected Ghost Stories of Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, Arkham House, $6.00.

Worse Things Waiting, Manly Wade Wellman, Carcosa, $9,50.

The Magic Valley Travelers, Peter Haining, ed., Taplinger, $8.50.



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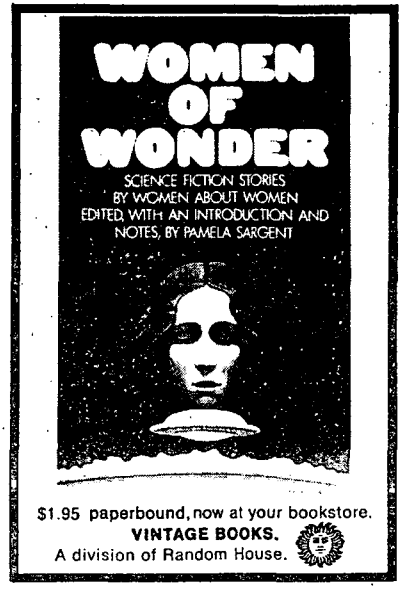
mastery of this approach. Her Yankees are beautifully observed, as are their countryside, their houses, their clothes and daily appliances. She was not only a sharp examiner of what went on about her, she saw it all with a lovely sense of humor, gentle, but most ironic, solidly based on human foolishness seen through clear but wonderfully understanding eyes. I have long counted a number of these tales among my favorites — Arkham House says this collection constitutes Mrs. Freeman's entire output of spooky stories — and even those not up to the level of the best ones here are very worthy of your time. "Luella Miller" is, I think, one of the funniest and most ghastly variations on the vampire theme yet done. It concerns the doings of a little pink and white, fluffy lady who is absolutely helpless and completely dependent on kindly aid, and who is mercilessly and totally deadly. "The Southwest Chamber" and "The Vacant Lot" are both spectacular productions and most cleverly combine the humor of solidly practical people finally daunted by the genuinely spooky events they're unfortunate enough to have to confront. There is also an extraordinary tale, "The Hall Bedroom," about a man going, sense by sense, to another kind of place than our own. And much more very good stuff, indeed, and an intelligent and useful introduction by Mr. Edward Wagenknecht.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Another way to make common sense nervous and faltery is to confront it with a hearty and confident faith that the strange events and creatures being spoken of so folksily are just plain, down to earth facts. There isn't any writer better at this back country, no nonsense approach than Manly Wade Wellman, and he now has a handsome book out from Carcosa (who are based in Chapel Hill, N.C., the book's a bargain at $9.50) called *Worse Things Waiting*. It's 352 pages of small type containing a couple of poems, twenty six short

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stories, and two novelets. The bulk of it, until now, was completely out of the reach of all save particularly ingenious collectors. And, if that's not enough, folks, it's lavishly illustrated by none other than Lee Brown Coye.

Wellman loves vampires, and there are a good dozen or more in *Worse Things*, some of them given the classic treatment as in "School For the Unspeakable," which starts a really nasty bunch of bloodsucking brats off on their highly satisfactory eternal damnation, "When It Was Moonlight," wherein E. A. Poe devises a new way to destroy one of the living dead, and another featuring none other than Count Dracula as its hero; but Wellman really shines when he puts his vampires into an atmosphere predominately bucolic, where the characters, fiends and all, are solid country people who speak solemnly in quaint dialects, and who all, in one way or another, firmly respect the old time religion. One of the best of these is the novelet "Fearful Rock," which pits the evil Persil Mandifer and his disgusting son Larue against Sergeant Jaeger, member of the Union Army, simple man of God, and staunch reader and user of *John George Hohman's POW-WOWS or LONG LOST FRIEND*. It's a lovely fight, and Jaeger survives it to return in the second novelet, "Coven," so that he might give the whatchacallit which flaps snickering through the night along the Missouri-Arkansas border its deserved comeuppance. Among the short stories that I enjoyed best would be "The Undead Soldier," which makes good use of the fairy tale device of the ominous repetition of a spooky phrase to bring the menace ever nearer to our throats. "Come Into My Parlour" has a swell vegetable monster, and then there's such as "Larroes Catch Meddlers," "The Pineys," "Dhoh" and "The Hairy Thunderer." These last two, by the way, are among a group of stories using American Indian legends and themes. Wellman was writing about Indians as if they were real people long before the idea caught on generally. The illustrations by Coye show that he is in top form, which is to say they are absolutely ghastly, horrific and to be kept out of the hands of all but the stout hearted and the brave. A grand job of putting together a book.

Another way to confound poor old common sense is to place it in an atmosphere so uncongenial it does not know how to get its bearings, or what to do next, and if there is a place on this globe more uncongenial to practicality and the supremacy of reason than Wales, I do not know of it. The tireless Mr. Peter Haining in *The Magic Valley*

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Travelers has put together a charming collection of stories and whatnot by Welsh folk themselves, or those that know enough about the place to evoke it effectively. Here's stuff by Machen, Dylan Thomas, Richard Hughes, Mary Shelley, Caradoc Evans, Charles Williams and other luminaries, plus a piece by Traditional and another by Anonymous. The land of Merlin and Arthur and God only know what, and common sense hasn't got a prayer.

Before leaving I would like to mention a publication of interest to anyone who enjoys the sort of thing discussed in this column. It's called *Whispers*, it's a quarterly, it costs $5.50 for an annual subscription, and its address is 5508 Dodge Drive, Fayetteville, N.C. This is a highly successful job of carrying on what Mr. Derleth was up to with his *Arkham Collector*, (with many of the same people — Leiber, Brennan, Coye, etc.), and it's run by an extremely dedicated man named Stuart David Schiff; it would be a damned shame if enough people didn't support it, as it surely deserves to survive.

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About the day Robert J. Gill brought the modern age to Feely, Missouri and something else departed . . . .

The Killing of Mother Corn

by DENNIS O'NEIL

"It is," said the agronomist, "the damdest thing I ever saw."

"What is?" Clarence Anderson demanded.

Judy Anderson fidgeted with the collar of her shirt and looked anxious.

The agronomist rubbed his thick hands together. Before answering Clarence, he studied the flat brown field they were standing in, the new bungalow a hundred yards away, the hazy Ozark mountains in the distance, and finally the July sun overhead and the bag of chemicals and instruments at his feet, as though these were pages of a book printed in an alien language.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "I've tested fifty samples, and the dirt on your property is just that — dirt. Not soil. Hell, I haven't even found *traces* of potassium, and damn little of any other nutrient. Mister Anderson, you can't grow weeds here, much less anything else. And I can't see any reason. It's flat land. There's no place for the nutrients to wash to, not that they would anyway."

"What can we do?" Judy asked.

The agronomist lifted his bag and said, "First, you buy fertilizer — richest mix you can get. I'd estimate a couple tons for your forty acres. You rent a tractor and plow in the fertilizer, and you wait a month and repeat the process. Then you wait a year, and early next spring you do it all again. Then you put in a crop of soybeans, and when they're ripe, you plow *them* in. The following season, you might plant a little corn with fair chance for harvest."

The agronomist bent and pinched a bit of dirt between his thumb and forefinger. "Some damn fool worked this acreage brutally. Slash and burn, probably."

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"The real estate agent said nobody's occupied the land for forty-five years," Clarence said.

"He lied to you, Mister Anderson."

Clarence couldn't accept that. He prided himself on his ability to judge men: as a foreman at the recently opened Bridge Industries lead refinery, he was daily called upon to gauge the truth of the excuses the redneck laborers offered, and he had yet to be proven wrong. And in his opinion, the realtor, Harry Slinkard, was as honest as a nun. Oh, he'd been swindled, he was sure, but not by Slinkard. Worse, his bride Judy had been cheated of her special dream, a garden of her own.

Nobody swindled Clarence Anderson, and nobody cheated his Judy.

Late Saturday afternoon, after he'd finished tidying up a few matters at the plant, he drove his Oldsmobile into Feeley and parked in front of Slinkard's office. He found the agent sitting at his desk reading the sports section of Friday's *St. Louis Globe Democrat.* He told Slinkard of the agronomist's verdict and watched Slinkard's expression change from joviality to caution.

"I'm not blaming *you,*" Clarence said. "I only want to find out what happened so we can prevent it from happening again."

"Perfectly understandable, Clarence," Slinkard replied as he stood and pulled a frayed ledger bound in imitation leather from the row of identical volumes on a shelf behind the desk. "We'll look her up for you." He licked his middle finger and used it to flip pages. "Here she be. Last occupant of the property in question was an Indian, name of Pawnee. No last name listed. He was a squatter, and according to the records, he left in 1930. Place's been vacant ever since. Hard spot to reach till you refinery folks built the road."

"Isn't there anything else?"

Slinkard closed the ledger. "No, sir. But I got an idea for you. You go talk to Isaac Gill. His grandpaw owned the adjoining farm. Isaac spent a lot of time there as a boy. If anybody can help you, it's him. He's livin' above the barbershop, cross from Knopp's tavern."

Clarence walked the three blocks to the barbershop, nodding to everyone he met, whether or not he recognized them, because he felt part of his job was to improve community relations. He stopped at a weather-beaten door next to the striped pole and rapped with his wedding ring. No one answered. He tried the knob and the door swung wide. He peered into the gloom and saw a narrow flight of stairs.

Mister Gill?" he called.

A voice like a creaking hinge

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said, "Come ahead, whoever you are."

Clarence stepped inside and, wrinkling his nose at the musty odor, climbed the stairs and was in a low-ceilingled room, marvelously cool after the swelter of the street. The walls were bare except for a collection of Indian artifacts hung apparently at random — feathered headdresses, hatchets with flint heads, animal skins decorated with beads. He heard a squeaking and turned to face a man in a rocker, silhouetted in the slanting ray of sunlight from a dirty window. As Clarence's eyes adjusted to the semidarkness, he could see the man was old: wisps of white hair sprouted from the sides of his otherwise bald head, and his deeply tanned skin was a map of wrinkles. To Clarence, he seemed as ancient and useless as his relics.

"Well?" the man questioned in that creak.

Clarence apologized and explained why he had come.

Isaac Gill chuckled a full minute, vastly amused at a private joke. Clarence wondered if Gill had forgotten his presence.

Finally, as though speaking to himself, Gill murmured, "Yeah, I can solve your mystery. I know the reason nothing will grow in your ground, but you won't believe me, not a word. Progress did it — progress, and my father's radio. You really want to hear the story?"

"Yes, I do," Clarence said.

"I'm too old to shout. Sit close, on the windowsill, and listen."

Clarence sat and listened to Isaac Gill droning in the twilight:

It was the autumn of 1929 (Gill began) and the whole Wall Street caboodle was tearing apart like paper in a rain storm. Of course, we hereabouts weren't much affected by the crash. Feeley was mostly a farm town, and except for the banker and the few who owned the bottomland, we were poor white trash; there couldn't have been more than a dozen stock market investors from one end of the county to the other. But we read about the crash, and it scared us. Saturday mornings at the tavern and the general store and my father's feed store, the Depression was the chief topic of conversation, aside from crops and church doings. According to my father, the country had been betrayed.

"Hoover and his Republican friends betrayed us all," he'd tell my mother and me at supper. "You can bet *they* won't starve. Their pockets are well lined, you can bet."

We'd agree, to calm him.

But he refused to be pacified. He was a passionate believer in the Democratic Party — a rare breed in rural Missouri — and in the

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American dream, fond of quoting William Jennings Bryan, desperately faithful to the notion that his children, if not himself, would reap the benefits of democracy and live like kings, or at least like Carnegies.

I remember him wrestling a barrel of pick handles into the store and saying, "They think they can spit on the little fella. Well, Ike my lad, your dad is a little fella that won't sit still for being spat upon. No siree bob." He wiped his brow on his sleeve and said triumphantly, "I'm going to put in a line of radios."

I said, "I beg your pardon?"

He got a catalogue from beneath the counter and showed me an advertisement:

FINE QUALITY CRYSTAL SETS
Best Engineering Possible
Guaranteed 100% Cockaday Circuits

Father admired the illustration. "Those Cockaday circuits are tops."

"What's a Cockaday circuit?"

"It's *wires,* Ike. Inside the radio."

"What's a radio?"

"A machine, Ike. You switch it on and you hear folks talking a hundred miles away. A thousand miles. From New York and Europe and everywhere. Music, too."

"Sounds great," I said sincerely.

"You bet it is, Ikey. I'll show Hoover he can knock us down, but not out. No siree."

I couldn't follow his logic, but I responded to his enthusiasm and joined in the deliberations his project entailed. How many sets? Which kind? We decided on three units for a starter, a deluxe speaker model and two earphone models. He scribbled an order and sealed it in an envelope.

We stopped at the post office to mail it, and father, with elaborate casualness, mentioned his plan to Mister Dade, the postman.

"Radio is the best way I can repay the community," father said to Dade. "Having radios will boost morale, make us feel modern."

"Ain't many as will afford 'em," Dade said.

"Course not. But everyone will be welcome at the store to listen."

"Mighty interesting," Dade said.

It truly was. To the world at large, the marvels of the wireless were commonplace. I later learned that a Pittsburgh station had been regularly airing programs since 1920, and Robert La Follette had broadcast campaign speeches in 1924. By '29, major cities were served by both the National and the Columbia networks and a lot of local outfits. But Feeley was not a major city. As I mentioned, we were small, barely larger than a hamlet, and poor; and being situated in the

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Ozark foothills, we were off the main roads. Automobiles were still a novelty, cause for astonishment and suspicion, and gadgets designed to suck noise from the empty air were pure fantasy.

So my father took a considerable amount of good-natured abuse when the farmers and townspeople heard of his scheme. His customers would say:

"Robert, votin' Dimmycrat musta druv you crazy."

And:

"Reckon you'll need a mule kick in the head 'fore your raddeo will work proper."

Feeley humor, such as it was.

Always, my father would reply cheerfully, "Wait and see. Wait and *hear.*"

Then, one evening at dusk, we had a visitor who hadn't come to scoff. A visitor at once grim and amazing — amazing because I suppose I never expected to meet him within the town boundaries. Maybe I never credited his existence. Pawnee, the Indian. All we knew about him was that he squatted somewhere in the thickly wooded area south of Feeley, probably near the river. Hunters occasionally spotted him in the woods, and we heard reports of him doctoring the Negroes in the shanties along the railroad tracks. He was like a neglected monument nobody ever bothered to visit.

Here he was, though, emerging from the shadows to stand straight and silent in my father's store, clad in ratty leather leggings and vest, his silky white hair falling to his shoulders, brows knit, expression stern.

"Yessir?" father said to him. "Can I help you?"

The Indian spoke in heavy hollow tones, not accented, certainly not in pidgin English, just monotonous and foreign-sounding. "Tomorrow a shipment arrives from St. Louis. Send it back."

"Can't rightly do that," father said, bewildered.

"You spoil the hunting. You spoil the forests and the water. Now you would violate the air itself. The spirit of Mother Corn lives in the air. She is sick. She cannot survive your rape."

Father flushed, sputtered — *rape* was an obscenity — and the Indian stalked away.

"He's got a vile mouth," father said.

As a university student, I would read that Mother Corn was a deity to the Plains Indians — the tribes the government forced to walk the Trail of Tears in the early Nineteenth Century — a goddess of fertility not unlike the Greeks' Demeter. They held harvest festivals in her honor and sometimes sacrificed maidens to her, also like the Greeks. But at the moment I

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was an unlettered adolescent, pretending to share my parent's shock at a dirty word, rape, and secretly delighted.

Father shook me awake at six. He was already dressed in his Mass-going clothes.

"The big day has *a*-rrived, Ike," he said. "The day Robert J. Gill brings the modern age to Feeley, Missouri."

We gobbled our usual breakfast of eggs, flapjacks and coffee and hurried to the depot. We arrived at six forty-five, early; the Wabash local from St. Louis to Columbia wasn't due in Feeley until seven twenty and rarely reached us earlier than eight. To pass the time, father chatted with the stationmaster, and I played mumblety-peg. I noticed Pawnee sitting under a tree nearby, his arms folded across his chest and, incredibly, a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back.

The train, true to form, wheezed around the bend at precisely eight by the depot clock, and the conductor plunked a wooden crate down on the platform. Father ran to him.

"You Gill?" the conductor asked, and Father nodded yes. "Sign the receipt." Father scribbled his signature on the conductor's pad.

"Hep-*board!*" the conductor yelled.

The crate was splendid, fresh-made, smelling of the sawmill, the nails glinting like gems. A message was stenciled on the lid:

HANDLE WITH CARE
Radios

"See that, Ike?" father crowed. "Says *radios.*"

Father hefted the crate and held it as though he were the bearer of a crown on a velvet cushion en route to a coronation. We began our triumphant march.

The Indian blocked our path. Father tried to circle him, and the Indian shuffled sideways. For a second they resembled awkward dancers doing a minuet.

"Get out of my way," father said, his voice quavering slightly.

"No."

Suddenly, the Indian unlimbered his weapons, nocked an arrow, drew and aimed at father.

"This is an outrage," father said. "I'll put the sheriff on you."

In retrospect the scene is ridiculous: Father, neat and dapper in his suit and tie and two-tone shoes, threatened by a ragged anachronism. Threatened by an arrow, no less, in broad daylight, in Feeley, in 1929. Yet I felt fear, and I could see father trembling.

"Get the sheriff," he said to me.

The Indian's fingers uncurled from the bowstring. The shaft whipped forward and thunked into the crate.

"By *gosh!*" father cried. He

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carefully lowered the crate and sprang at the would-be slayer of his radios. They tussled briefly, lost their balance, fell and flailed, raising tiny puffs of dust. Somehow, father got on top and, gasping for breath, smacked his fist onto the Indian's cheek.

"There, you heathen," he panted.

I was thrilled: my father, the brawler.

We left the vanquished foe where he'd fallen, we champions of civilization not deigning to acknowledge his existence further, and continued our march. Caesar entering Rome. Grant entering Richmond. Us entering the feed store, bearing the fruits of our victory.

Father pried off the lid with a crowbar and reverently removed the deluxe model crystal set with the guaranteed Cockaday circuits. He placed it on the counter and consulted the instruction sheet, mumbling under his breath: a priest of technology performing the Cockaday ritual, his fingers fumbling, screwing in the speaker horn and connecting wires to the battery.

I expected symphonies. I got silence.

"Needs tuning," father said confidently.

He nudged the crystal tuner over the copper-wound cylinder; and we heard it, loud and agonized, coming from the speaker, the floors, the walls, the street, inside our own bodies, everywhere, engulfing us in pain and remorse and sorrow. I clapped my palms to my ears and whimpered, and father groped for the tuner, his hand jerking in spasms. As quickly as it began, it ended, and I was crying, hugging my father, and he was whispering a plea for forgiveness. I've never been able to forget those seconds, and I've tried. For forty years, I've tried.

Gradually, we regained control of ourselves, and we became aware we were hearing what we'd expected to hear, a radio broadcast: "Former Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced his bid for the Democratic nomination—"

Wearily, father disconnected the battery. We replaced the set and carried the crate to a storage shed. It was eventually stolen.

Father died in 1954 without ever having seen television. I guess he couldn't forget, either.

Forget the sound of the woman's scream.

"That's a fascinating yarn," Clarence said.

"No yarn," Isaac Gill said. "Truth."

"What happened to the Indian."

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"He vanished — *fffft*. Wasn't much sense in his sticking around after Mother Corn died. I guess he himself was overdue for death."

The light had faded. Isaac Gill rocked in darkness.

At the stairway, Clarence said, "Thanks for your time, Mister Gill. If you care to see the refinery, I'll personally give you the grand tour."

"I appreciate the offer, but I haven't a lot of use for industry and such."

"If you change your mind...."

"I won't."

Clarence returned to his car happy. The old geezer and his crazy nonsense — Judy will love it. He couldn't wait to tell her. He drove to the supply house at the edge of town and ordered three tons of fertilizer, the extra ton to be safe. He was surprised at how cheap the stuff was.

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A short-short about a story teller of the future and his audience . . .

Innocence

by JOANNA RUSS

I must be the last one in the world because nobody else understands. Siegfried, for instance — well, his name was something like that. He had learned nothing but facts from his cradle and that made him very proud. He was a big fair man and he drove us from here to there among the stars. I was a passenger, that's all, and dark as a mole, but he was polite and made nothing of it. He took me into the engineering room and showed me the instrument panel glowing against the gray walls and the great catalogues and the portholes for watching the stars. He told me how innocent I was and how I ought not to be let out alone. That's not fair; I'm just not interested, that's all.

"What do you know?" he said, and when I said I knew some stories he laughed. He laughed loudly, throwing his head back so that the lamplight fell on his hair. I lowered my head and laughed modestly.

"Do you?" he said. "Then you must tell them to me."

So I told him about the beautiful white city whose name I had forgotten. It has grassy hills around central fountains where jet's of water shine, shine like crystal into the sky. People come out of the hills every year in gold-and-red processions to drive swallows into the city.

It was just a story for diversion, but he listened carefully and then he said:

"Did you get that out of a book?"

I shook my head.

"Then you must have been there."

"No, of course not," I said.

He came back again to hear more. Then he said, "It must be in the past. I've never seen a place like that, and I've been all over the galaxy, you know. It can't be more than a few thousand years back."

"It still exists," I said, "but it's very old. It's ten billion years old. I know."

"That's impossible," he said

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sharply, but he wouldn't explain why. He said I probably wouldn't understand. That was the second time. The third time, he came with a new idea.

"You must simply have forgotten where it is," he said firmly. "You haven't any head for facts. Now try to remember."

But of course I couldn't, and he had to content himself with everything about the city but where it was and its name.

"It must be hidden somewhere," he muttered angrily, kicking at the artificial fire. "Some out-of-the-way place — obviously primitive — you ought to remember." It was only a game. I told him they had real fires there, yellow flames that they used for beauty, to look transparent against stone. He became annoyed; he wandered around the room calling me fool, fool, had I no memory for facts? Well, that was all he knew.

Then he would wheel about and fire questions at me about statistics and population and such things.

"What work do they do?" he said.

"Why, none," I said, "none, of course, except gold smithing and magic and so forth." I only meant it to be amusing.

"I want to go there," he said. "You must have seen pictures of it. I've never been in a place like that. I'd like to visit there."

Soon he accused me. "You know where it is," he said, "and you're hiding it. You must think I would bring other people in and spoil it, but I won't; I know better than that. You've got to tell me where it is. I can't rest until I go there. I could buy a ship — a small one — it's not that expensive, you know — and go there. I could. It's so different from other places — you know, I want to stay there for the rest of my life. I don't know why, but I think I could stay there."

"Oh, come!" I said. He was staring embarrassedly at the ceiling.

"You know," he said in a low voice, "I think I might not die there. See, that's how I feel. That's what you've done."

"It isn't anywhere," I said. "I made it up out of my head, every bit of it. It doesn't even exist."

"You've forgotten," he said, "because you're a fool, but I'm going to get a ship and travel around and back and forth until I find it. I'm no fool. I'm going to find it." Then he went steadily out of the room.

He did that, too; the stupid hero is out there now, between Antares and Deneb or somewhere — nobody has any sense. I must be the last one because nobody but me understands. Innocents! The universe is full of them.

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This story and John Varley's earlier piece for us ("Picnic on Nearside," Aug. 1974) share the theme of vast change in the traditional roles of sex and the family, this time set against a suspenseful drama on a turbulent Mercury.

Retrograde Summer

by JOHN VARLEY

I was at the spaceport an hour early on the day my clone-sister was to arrive from Luna. Part of it was eagerness to see her. She was three E-years older than me, and we had never met. But I admit that I grab every chance I can get to go to the port and just watch the ships arrive and depart. I've never been off-planet. Someday I'll go, but not as a paying passenger. I was about to enroll in pilot-training school.

Keeping my mind on the arrival time of the shuttle from Luna was hard, because my real interest was in the liners departing for all the far-off places in the system. On that very day the *Elizabeth Browning* was lifting off on a direct, high-gee run for Pluto, with connections for the cometary zone. She was sitting on the field a few kilometers from me, onboarding passengers and freight. Very little of the latter. The *Browning* was a luxury-class ship, where you paid a premium fare to be sealed into a liquid-filled room, doped to the gills and fed through a tube for the five-gee express run. Nine days later, at wintertime Pluto, they decanted you and put you through ten hours of physical rehabilitation. You could have made it in fourteen days at two gees and only have been mildly uncomfortable, but maybe it's worth it to some people. I had noticed that the *Browning* was never crowded.

I might not have noticed the arrival of the Lunar shuttle, but the tug was lowering it between me and the *Browning*. They were berthing it in Bay 9, a recessed area a few hundred meters from where I was standing. So I ducked into the tunnel that would take me there.

I arrived in time to see the tug

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cut the line and shoot into space to meet the next incoming ship. The Lunar shuttle was a perfectly reflective sphere sitting in the middle of the landing bay. As I walked up to it, the force-field roof sprang into being over the bay, cutting off the summertime sunlight. The air started rushing in, and in a few minutes my suit turned off. I was suddenly sweating, cooking in the heat that hadn't been dissipated as yet. My suit had cut off too soon again. I would have to have that checked. Meantime, I did a little dance to keep my bare feet away from the too-hot concrete.

When the air temperature reached the standard 24 degrees, the field around the shuttle cut off. What was left behind was an insubstantial latticework of decks and bulkheads, with people gawking out of the missing outer walls of their rooms.

I joined the crowd of people clustered around the ramp. I had seen a picture of my sister, but it was an old one. I wondered if I'd recognize her.

There was no trouble. I spotted her at the head of the ramp, dressed in a silly-looking loonie frock coat and carrying a pressurized suitcase. I was sure it was her because she looked just like me, more or less, except that she was a female and she was frowning. She might have been a few centimeters taller than me, but that was from growing up in a lower gravity field.

I pushed my way over to her and took her case.

"Welcome to Mercury," I said, in my friendliest manner. She looked me over. I don't know why, but she took an instant dislike to me, or so it seemed. Actually, she had disliked me before we ever met.

"You must be Timmy," she said. I couldn't let her get away with that. There are limits.

"Timothy. And you're my sister, Jew."

"Jubilant."

We were off to a great start.

She looked around her at the bustle of people in the landing bay. Then she looked overhead at the flat-black underside of the force-roof and seemed to shrink away from it.

"Where can I rent a suit?" she asked. "I'd like to get one installed before you have a blowout here."

"It isn't that bad," I said. "We do have them more often here than you do in Luna, but it can't be helped." I started off in the direction of General Environments, and she fell in beside me. She was having difficulty walking. I'd hate to be a loonie; just about anywhere they go, they're too heavy.

"I was reading on the trip that

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you had a blowout here at the port only four lunations ago."

I don't know why, but I felt defensive. I mean, sure we have blowouts here, but you can hardly *blame* us for them. Mercury has a lot of tidal stresses; that means a lot of quakes. Any system will break down if you shake it around enough.

"All right," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "It happens I was here during that one. It was in the middle of the last dark year. We lost pressure in about ten percent of the passages, but it was restored in a few minutes. No lives were lost."

"A few minutes is more than enough to kill someone without a suit, isn't it?" How could I answer that? She seemed to think she had won a point. "So I'll feel a lot better when I get into one of your suits."

"Okay, let's get a suit into you." I was trying to think of something to re-start the conversation and drawing a blank. Somehow she seemed to have a low opinion of our environmental engineers on Mercury and was willing to take her contempt out on me.

"What are you training for?" I ventured. "You must be out of school. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to be an environmental engineer."

"Oh."

I was relieved when they finally had her lie on the table, made the connection from the computer into the socket at the back of her head, and turned off her motor control and sensorium. The remainder of the trip to GE had been a steady lecture about the shortcomings of the municipal pressure service in Mercury Port. My head was swimming with facts about quintuple-redundant failless pressure sensors, self-sealing locks, and blowout drills. I'm *sure* we have all those things, and just as good as the ones in Luna. But the best anyone can do with the quakes shaking everything up a hundred times a day is achieve a ninety-nine percent safety factor. Jubilant had sneered when I trotted out that figure. She quoted one to me with fifteen decimal places, all of them nines. That was the safety factor in Lunda.

I was looking at the main reason why we didn't need that kind of safety, right in the surgeon's hands. He had her chest opened up and the left lung removed, and he was placing the suit generator into the cavity. It looked pretty much like the lung he had removed except it was made of metal and had a mirror finish. He hooked it up to her trachea and the stump ends of the pulmonary

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arteries and did some adjustments. Then he closed her and applied somatic sealant to the incisions. In thirty minutes she would be ready to wake up, fully healed. The only sign of the operation would be the gold button of the intake valve under her left collarbone. And if the pressure were to drop by two millibars in the next instant, she would be surrounded by the force field that is a Mercury suit. She would be safer than she had ever been in her life, even in the oh-so-safe warrens in Luna.

The surgeon made the adjustment in my suit's brain while Jubilant was still out. Then he installed the secondary items in her; the pea-sized voder in her throat so she could talk without inhaling and exhaling, and the binaural radio receptors in her middle ears. Then he pulled the plug out of her brain, and she sat up. She seemed a little more friendly. An hour of sensory deprivation tends to make you more open and relaxed when you come out of it. She started to get back into her loonie coat.

"That'll just burn off when you go outside," I pointed out.

"Oh, of course. I guess I expected to go by tunnel. But you don't have many tunnels here, do you?"

You can't keep them pressurized, can you?

I really *was* beginning to feel defensive about our engineering.

"The main trouble you'll have is adjusting to not breathing."

We were at the west portal, looking through the force-curtain that separated us from the outside. There was a warm breeze drifting away from the curtain, as there always is in summertime. It was caused by the heating of the air next to the curtain by the wavelengths of light that are allowed to pass through so we can see what's outside. It was the beginning of retrograde summer, when the sun backtracks at the zenith and gives us a triple helping of very intense light and radiation. Mercury Port is at one of the hotspots, where retrograde sun motion coincides with solar noon. So even though the force-curtain filtered out all but a tiny window of visible light, what got through was high-powered stuff.

"Is there any special trick I should know?"

I'll give her credit; she wasn't any kind of fool; she was just overcritical. When it came to the operation of her suit, she was completely willing to concede that I was the expert.

"Not really. You'll feel an overpowering urge to take a breath after a few minutes, but it's all psychological. Your blood will be

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oxygenated. It's just that your brain won't feel right about it. But you'll get over it. And don't try to breath when you talk. Just subvocalize, and the radio in your throat will pick it up."

I thought about it and decided to throw in something else, free of charge.

"If you're in the habit of talking to yourself, you'd better try to break yourself of it. Your voder will pick it up if you mutter, or sometimes if you just think too loud. Your throat moves sometimes when you do that, you know. It can get embarrassing."

She grinned at me, the first time she had done it. I found myself liking her. I had always *wanted* to, but this was the first chance she had given me.

"Thanks. I'll bear it in mind. Shall we go?"

I stepped out first. You feel nothing at all when you step through a force-curtain. You can't step through it at all unless you have a suit generator installed, but with it turned on, the field just forms around your body as you step through. I turned around and could see nothing but a perfectly flat, perfectly reflective mirror. It bulged out as I watched in the shape of a nude woman, and the bulge separated from the curtain. What was left was a silver-plated Jubilant.

The suit generator causes the field to follow the outlines of your body, but from one to one and a half millimeters from the skin. It oscillates between those limits, and the changing volume means a bellows action forces the carbon dioxide out through your intake valve. You expel waste gas and cool yourself in one operation. The field is perfectly reflective except for two pupil-sized discontinuities that follow your eye movements and let in enough light to see by, but not enough to blind you.

"What happens if I open my mouth?" she mumbled. It takes a while to get the knack of subvocalizing clearly.

"Nothing. The field extends over your mouth, like it does over your nostrils. It won't go down your throat."

A few minutes later: "I sure would like to take a breath." She would get over it. "Why is it so hot?"

"Because at the most efficient setting your suit doesn't release enough carbon dioxide to cool you down below about thirty degrees. So you'll sweat a bit."

"It feels like thirty-five or forty."

"It must be your imagination. You can change the setting by turning the nozzle of your air valve, but that means your tank will be releasing some oxygen with the

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CO_2, and you never know when you'll need it."

"How much of a reserve is there?"

"You're carrying forty-eight hours worth. Since the suit releases oxygen directly into your blood, we can use about ninety-five percent of it, instead of throwing most of it away to cool you off, like your loonie suits do." I couldn't resist that one.

"The term is Lunarian," she said, icily. Oh, well. I hadn't even known the term was derogatory.

"I think I'll sacrifice some margin for comfort now. I feel bad enough as it is in this gravity without stewing in my own sweat."

"Suit yourself. You're the environment expert."

She looked at me, but I don't think she was used to reading expressions on a reflective face. She turned the nozzle that stuck out above her left breast, and the flow of steam from it increased.

"That should bring you down to about twenty degrees, and leave you with about thirty hours of oxygen. That's under ideal conditions, of course; sitting down and keeping still. The more you exert yourself, the more oxygen the suit wastes keeping you cool."

She put her hands on her lips. "Timothy, are you telling me that I shouldn't cool off? I'll do whatever you say."

"No, I think you'll be all right. It's a thirty-minute trip to my house. And what you say about the gravity has merit; you probably need the relief. But I'd turn it up to twenty-five as a reasonable compromise."

She silently readjusted the valve.

Jubilant thought it was silly to have a traffic conveyor that operated in two-kilometer sections. She complained to me the first three or four times we got off the end of one and stepped onto another. She shut up about it when we came to a section knocked out by a quake. We had a short walk between sections of the temporary slideway, and she saw the crews working to bridge the twenty-meter gap that had opened beneath the old one.

We only had one quake on the way home. It didn't amount to anything; just enough motion that we had to do a little dance to keep our feet under us. Jubilant didn't seem to like it much. I wouldn't have noticed it at all, except Jubilant yelped when it hit.

Our house at that time was situated at the top of a hill. We had carried it up there after the big quake seven darkyears before that had shaken down the cliffside where we used to live. I had been

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buried for ten hours in that one — the first time I ever needed digging out. Mercurians don't like living in valleys. They have a tendency to fill up with debris during the big quakes. If you live at the top of a rise, you have a better chance of being near the top of the rubble when it slides down. Besides, my mother and I both liked the view.

Jubilant liked it, too. She made her first comment on the scenery as we stood outside the house and looked out over the valley we had just crossed. Mercury Port was sitting atop the ridge, thirty kilometers away. At that distance you could just make out the hemisphereical shape of the largest buildings.

But Jubilant was more interested in the mountains behind us. She pointed to a glowing violet cloud that rose from behind one of the foothills and asked me what it was.

"That's quicksilver grotto. It always looks like that at the start of retrograde summer. I'll take you over there later. I think you'll like it."

Dorothy greeted us as we stepped through the wall.

I couldn't put my finger on what was bothering mom. She seemed happy enough to see Jubilant after seventeen years. She kept saying inane things about how she had grown and how pretty she looked. She had us stand side by side and pointed out how much we looked like each other. It was true, of course, since we were genetically identical. She was five centimeters taller than me, but she could lose that in a few months in Mercury's gravity.

"She looks just like you did two years ago, before your last Change," she told me. That was a slight misstatement; I hadn't been quite as sexually mature the last time I was a female. But she was right in essence. Both Jubilant and I were genotypically male, but mom had had my sex changed when I first came to Mercury, when I was a few months old. I had spent the first fifteen years of my life female. I was thinking of Changing back, but wasn't in a hurry.

"You're looking well yourself, Glitter," Jubilant said.

Mom frowned for an instant. "It's Dorothy now, honey. I changed my name when we moved here. We use Old Earth names on Mercury."

"I'm sorry, I forgot. My mother always used to call you Glitter when she spoke of you. Before she, I mean before I ...."

There was an awkward silence. I felt like something was being concealed from me, and my ears perked up. I had high hopes of learning some things from Jubil-

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ant, things that Dorothy had never told me no matter how hard I prodded her. At least I knew where to start in drawing Jubilant out.

It was a frustrating fact at that time that I knew little of the mystery surrounding how I came to grow up on Mercury instead of in Luna, and why I had a clone-sister. Having a clone twin is a rare enough thing that it was inevitable I'd try to find out how it came to pass. It wasn't socially debilitating, like having a fraternal sibling or something scandalous like that. But I learned early not to mention it to my friends. They wanted to know how it happened, how my mom managed to get around the laws that forbid that kind of unfair preference. One Person, One Child: that's the first moral lesson any child learns, even before Thou Shalt Not Take a Life. Mom wasn't in jail, and so it must have been legal. But how? And why? She wouldn't talk, but maybe Jubilant would.

Dinner was eaten in a strained silence, interrupted by awkward attempts at conversation. Jubilant was suffering from culture shock and an attack of nerves. I could understand it, looking around me with her eyes. Loonies, pardon me, Lunarians, live all their lives in burrows down in the rock and come to need the presence of solid, substantial walls around them. They don't go outside much. When they do, they are wrapped in a steel and plastic coccoon that they can feel around them, and they look out of it through a window. She was feeling terribly exposed and trying to be brave about it. When inside a force-bubble house, you might as well be sitting on a flat platform under the blazing sun. The bubble is invisible from the inside.

When I realized what was bothering her, I turned up the polarization. Now the bubble looked like tinted glass.

"Oh, you needn't," she said, gamely. "I have to get used to it. I just wish you had *walls* somewhere I could look at."

It was more apparent than ever that something was upsetting Dorothy. She hadn't noticed Jubilant's unease, and that's not like her. She should have had some curtains rigged to give our guest a sense of enclosure.

I did learn some things from the intermittent conversation at the table. Jubilant had divorced her mother when she was ten E-years old, an absolutely extraordinary age. The only grounds for divorce at that age are really incredible things like insanity of religious evangelism. I didn't know much about Jubilant's foster mother — not even her name — but I did

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know that she and Dorothy had been good friends back in Luna. Somehow, the question of how and why Dorothy had abandoned her child and taken me, a chip off the block, to Mercury, was tied up in that relationship.

"We could never get close, as far back as I can remember," Jubilant was saying. "She told me crazy things, she didn't seem to fit in. I can't really explain it, but the court agreed with me. It helped that I had a good lawyer."

"Maybe part of it was the unusual relationship," I said, helpfully. "You know what I mean. It isn't all that common to grow up with a foster mother, instead of your real mother." That was greeted with such a dead silence that I wondered if I should just shut up for the rest of dinner. There were meaningful glances exchanged.

"Yes, that might have been part of it. Anyway, within three years of your leaving for Mercury, I knew I couldn't take it. I should have gone with you. I was only a child, but even than I wanted to come with you." She looked appealingly at Dorothy, who was studying the table. Jubilant had stopped eating.

"Maybe I'd better not talk about it."

To my surprise, Dorothy agreed. That cinched it for me. They wouldn't talk about it because they were keeping something from me.

Jubilant took a nap after dinner. She said she wanted to go to the grotto with me but had to rest from the gravity. While she slept I tried once more to get Dorothy to tell me the whole story of her life on the moon.

"But *why* am I alive at all? You say you left Jubilant, your own child, three years old, with a friend who would take care of her in Luna. Didn't you *want* to take her with you?"

She looked at me tiredly. We'd been over this ground before.

"Timmy, you're an adult now, and have been for three years. I've told you that you're free to leave me if you want. You will soon, anyway. But I'm not going into it any further."

"Mom, you know I can't insist. But don't you have enough respect for me not to keep feeding me that story? There's more behind it."

"Yes! Yes, there is more behind it. But I prefer to let it lie in the past. It's a matter of personal privacy. Don't you have enough respect for *me* to stop grilling me about it?" I had never seen her this upset. She got up and walked through the wall and down the hill. Halfway down, she started to run.

I started after her, but came

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back after a few steps. I didn't know what I'd say to her that hadn't already been said.

We made it to the grotto in easy stages. Jubilant was feeling much better after her rest, but still had trouble on some of the steep slopes.

I hadn't been to the grotto for four lightyears and hadn't played in it for longer than that. But it was still a popular place with the kids. There were scores of them.

We stood on a narrow ledge overlooking the quicksilver pool, and this time Jubilant was really impressed. The quicksilver pool is at the bottom of a narrow gorge that was blocked off a long time ago by a quake. One side of the gorge is permanently in shade, because it faces north and the sun never gets that high in our latitude. At the bottom of the gorge is the pool; twenty meters across, a hundred meters long, and about five meters deep. We *think* it's that deep, but just try sounding a pool of mercury. A lead weight sinks through it like thick molasses, and just about everything else floats. The kids had a fair-sized boulder out in the middle, using it for a boat.

That's all pretty enough, but this was retrograde summer, and the temperature was climbing toward the maximum. So the mercury was near the boiling point, and the whole area was thick with the vapor. When the streams of electrons from the sun passed through the vapor, it lit up, flickering and swirling in a ghostly indigo storm. The level was down, but it would never all boil away because it kept condensing on the dark cliffside and running back into the pool.

"Where does it all come from?" Jubilant asked, when she got her breath.

"Some of it's natural, but the majority comes from the factories in the port. It's a by-product of some of the fusion processes that they can't find any use for, and so they release it into the environment. It's too heavy to drift away, and so during darkyear, it condenses in the valleys. This one is especially good for collecting it. I used to play here when I was younger."

She was impressed. There's nothing like it on Luna. From what I hear, Luna is plain dull on the outside. Nothing moves for billions of years.

"I never saw anything so pretty. What do you do in it, though? Surely it's too dense to swim in?"

"Truer words were never spoken. It's all you can do to force your hand half a meter into the stuff. If you could balance, you

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could stand on it and sink in just about fifteen centimeters. But that doesn't mean you can't swim, you swim *on* it. Come on down, I'll show you."

She was still gawking at the ionized cloud, but she followed me. That cloud can hypnotize you. At first you think it's all purple; then you start seeing other colors out of the corners of your eyes. You can never see them plainly, they're too faint. But they're there. It's caused by local impurities of other gases.

I understand people used to make lamps using ionized gases: neon, argon, mercury, and so forth. Walking down into quicksilver gully is exactly like walking into the glow of one of those old lamps.

Halfway down the slope, Jubilant's knees gave way. Her suit field stiffened with the first impact when she landed on her behind and started to slide. She was a rigid statue by the time she plopped into the pool, frozen into an awkward posture trying to break her fall. She slid across the pool and came to rest on her back.

I dived onto the surface of the pool and was easily carried all the way across to her. She was trying to stand up and finding it impossible. Presently she began to laugh, realizing that she must look pretty silly.

"There's no way you're going to stand up out here. Look, here's how you move." I flipped over on my belly and started moving my arms in a swimming motion. You start with them in front of you, and bring them back to your sides in a long circular motion. The harder you dig into the mercury, the faster you go. And you keep going until you dig your toes in. The pool is frictionless.

Soon she was swimming along beside me, having a great time. Well, so was I. Why is it that we stop doing so many fun things when we grow up? There's nothing in the solar system like swimming on mercury. It was coming back to me now, the sheer pleasure of gliding along on the mirror-bright surface with your chin plowing up a wake before you. With your eyes just above the surface, the sensation of speed is tremendous.

Some of the kids were playing hockey. I wanted to join them, but I could see from the way they eyed us that we were too big and they thought we shouldn't be out here in the first place. Well, that was just tough. I was having too much fun swimming.

After several hours, Jubilant said she wanted to rest. I showed her how it could be done without going to the side, forming a tripod by sitting with your feet spread wide apart. That's about the only

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thing you can do except life flat. Any other position causes your support to slip out from under you. Jubilant was content to lie flat.

"I still can't get over being able to look right at the sun," she said. "I'm beginning to think you might have the better system here. With the internal suits, I mean."

"I thought about that," I said. "You loo... Lunarians don't spend enough time on the surface to make a force-suit necessary. It'd be too much trouble and expense, especially for children. You wouldn't believe what it costs to keep a child in suits. Dorothy won't have her debts paid off for twenty years."

"Yes, but it might be worth it. Oh, I can see you're right that it would cost a lot, but I won't be outgrowing them. How long do they last?"

"They should be replaced every two or three years." I scooped up a handful of mercury and let it dribble through my hands and onto her chest. I was trying to think of an indirect way to get the talk onto the subject of Dorothy and what Jubilant knew about her. After several false starts, I came right out and asked her what they had been trying not to say.

She wouldn't be drawn out.

"What's in that cave over there?" she asked, rolling over on her belly.

"That's the grotto."

"What's in it?"

"I'll show you if you'll talk."

She gave me a look. "Don't be childish, Timothy. If your mother wants you to know about her life in Luna, she'll tell you. It's not my business."

"I won't be childish if you'll stop treating me like a child. We're both adults. You can tell me whatever you want without asking my mother."

"Let's drop the subject."

"That's what everyone tells me. All right, go on up to the grotto by yourself." And she did just that. I sat on the lake and glowered at everything. I don't enjoy being kept in the dark, and I especially don't like having my relatives talk around me.

I was just a little bemused to find out how important it had become to find out the real story of Dorothy's trip to Mercury. I had lived seventeen years without knowing, and it hadn't harmed me. But now that I had thought about the things she told me as a child, I saw that they didn't make sense. Jubilant arriving here had made me re-examine them. Why *did* she leave Jubilant in Luna? Why take a cloned infant instead?

The grotto is a cave at the head of the gully with a stream of quicksilver flowing from its mouth.

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That happens all lightyear, but the stream gets more substantial during the height of summer. It's caused by the mercury vapor concentrating in the cave, where it condenses and drips off the walls. I found Jubilant sitting in the center of a pool, entranced. The ionization glow in the cave seems much brighter than outside, where it has to compete with sunlight. Add to that the thousands of trickling streams of mercury throwing back reflections, and you have a place that has to be entered to be believed.

"Listen, I'm sorry I was pestering you. I ..."

"Shhh." She waved her hands at me. She was watching the drops fall from the roof to splash without a ripple into the isolated pools on the floor of the cave. So I sat beside her and watched it, too.

"I don't think I'd mind living here," she said, after what might have been an hour.

"I guess I never really considered living anywhere else."

She faced me, but turned away again. She wanted to read my face, but all she could see was the distorted reflection of her own.

"I thought you wanted to be a ship's captain."

"Oh, sure. But I'd always come back here." I was silent for another few minutes, thinking about something that had bothered me more and more lately.

"Actually, I might get into another line of work."

"Why?"

"Oh, I guess commanding a spaceship isn't what it used to be. You know what I mean?"

She looked at me again, this time tried even harder to see my face.

"Maybe I do."

"I know what you're thinking. Lots of kids want to be ship's captains. They grow out of it. Maybe I have. I think I was born a century too late for what I want. You can hardly find a ship anymore where the captain is much more than a figurehead. The real master of the ship is a committee of computers. They handle *all* the work. The captain can't even overrule them anymore."

"I wasn't aware it had gotten that bad."

"Worse. All of the passenger lines are shifting over to totally automated ships. The high-gee runs are already like that, on the theory that after a dozen trips at five gees, the crew is pretty much used up."

I pondered a sad fact of our modern civilization: the age of romance was gone. The solar system was tamed. There was no place for adventure.

"You could go to the cometary zone," she suggested.

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"That's the only thing that's kept me going toward pilot training. You don't need a computer out there hunting for black holes. I thought about getting a job and buying passage last darkyear, when I was feeling really low about it. But I'm going to try to get some pilot training before I go."

"That might be wise."

"I don't know. They're talking about ending the courses in astrogation. I may have to teach myself."

"You think we should get going? I'm getting hungry."

"No. Let's stay here a while longer. I love this place."

I'm sure we had been there for five hours, saying very little. I had asked her about her interest in environmental engineering and gotten a surprisingly frank answer. This was what she had to say about her chosen profession: "I found after I divorced my mother that I was interested in making safe places to live. I didn't feel very safe at that time." She found other reasons later, but she admitted that it was a need for security that still drove her. I meditated on her strange childhood. She was the only person I ever knew who didn't grow up with her natural mother.

"I was thinking about heading outsystem myself," she said after another long silence. "Pluto, for instance. Maybe we'll meet out there someday."

"It's possible."

There was a little quake; not much, but enough to start the pools of mercury quivering and make Jubilant ready to go. We were threading our way through the pools when there was a long, rolling shock, and the violet glow died away. We were knocked apart, and fell in total darkness.

"What was that?" There was the beginning of panic in her voice.

"It looks like we're blocked in. There must have been a slide over the entrance. Just sit tight and I'll find you."

"Where are you?" I can't find you. Timothy!"

"Just hold still and I'll run into you in a minute. Stay calm, just stay calm, there's nothing to worry abut. They'll have us out in a few hours."

"Timothy, I can't find you, I can't ..." She smacked me across the face with one of her hands, then was swarming all over me, I held her close and soothed her. Earlier in the day I might have been contemptuous of her behavior, but I had come to understand her better. Besides, no one likes to be buried alive. Not even me. I held her until I felt her relax.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize, I felt the

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same way the first time. I'm glad you're here. Being buried alone is much worse than just being buried alive. Now sit down, and do what I tell you. Turn your intake valve all the way to the left. Got it? Now we're using oxygen at the slowest possible rate. We have to keep as still as possible so we don't heat up too much."

"All right. What next?"

"Well, for starters, do you play chess?"

"What? Is that all? Don't we have to turn on a signal or something?

"I already did."

"What if you're buried solid and your suit freezes to keep you from being crushed? How do you turn it on then?"

"It turns on automatically if the suit stays rigid for more than one minute."

"Oh. All right. Pawn to king four."

We gave up on the game after the fifteenth move. I'm not that good at visualizing the board, and while she was excellent at it, she was too nervous to plan her game. And I was getting nervous. If the entrance was blocked with rubble as I had thought, they should have had us out in under an hour. I had practiced estimating time in the dark and made it to be two hours since the quake. It must have been bigger than I thought. It could be a full day before they got around to us.

"I was surprised when you hugged me that I could touch you. I mean your skin, not your suit."

"I thought I felt you jump. The suits merge. When you touch me, we're wearing one suit instead of two. That comes in handy, sometimes."

We were laying side by side in a pool of mercury, arms around each other. We found it soothing.

"You mean ... I see. You can make love with your suit on. Is that what you're saying?"

"You should try it in a pool of mercury. That's the best way."

"We're in a pool of mercury."

"And we don't dare make love. It would overheat us. We might need our reserve."

She was quiet, but I felt her hands tighten behind my back.

"Are we in trouble, Timothy?"

"No, but we might be in for a long stay. You'll get thirsty by and by. Can you hold out?"

"It's too bad we can't make love. It would have kept my mind off it."

"Can you hold out?"

"I can hold out."

"Timothy, I didn't fill my tank before we left the house. Will that make a difference?"

I don't think I tensed, but she

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scared me badly. I thought about it, and didn't see how it mattered. She had used an hour's oxygen at most getting to the house, even at her stepped up cooling rate. I suddenly remembered how cool her skin had been when she came into my arms.

"Jubilant, was your suit set at maximum cooling when you left the house?"

"No, but I set it up on the way. It was so *hot*. I was about to pass out from the exertion."

"And you didn't turn it down until the quake?"

"That's right."

I did some rough estimations and didn't like the results. By the most pessimistic assumptions, she might not have more than about five hours of air left. At the outside, she might have twelve hours. And she could do simple arithmetic as well as I; there was no point in trying to hide it from her.

"Come closer to me," I said. She was puzzled, because we were already about as close as we could get. But I wanted to get our intake valves together. I hooked them up and waited three seconds.

"Now our tank pressures are equalized."

"Why did you do that? Oh, no, Timothy, you shouldn't have. It was my own fault for not being careful."

"I did it for me, too. How could I live with myself if you died in here and I could have saved you? Think about that."

"Timothy, I'll answer any question you want to ask about your mother."

That was the first time she got me mad. I hadn't been angry at her oversight with the refilling of the tank. Not even about the cooling. That was more my fault than hers. I had made it a game about the cooling rate, not really telling her how important it was to maintain a viable reserve. She hadn't taken me seriously, and now we were paying for my little joke. I had made the mistake of assuming that because she was an expert at Lunar safety, she could take care of herself. How could she do that if she didn't have a realistic estimate of the dangers?

But this offer sounded like repayment for the oxygen, and you don't do that on Mercury. In a tight spot, air is always shared freely. Thanks are rude.

"*Don't* think you owe me anything. It isn't right."

"That's not why I offered. If we're going to die down here, it seems silly for me to be keeping secrets. Does that make sense?"

"No. If we're going to die, what's the use in telling me? What good will it do me? And that

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doesn't make sense, either. We're not even *near* dying."

"It would at least be something to pass the time."

I sighed. At that time, it really wasn't important to know what I had been trying to learn from her.

"All right. Question one: Why did Dorothy leave you behind when she came here?" Once I had asked it, the question suddenly became important again.

"Because she's not our mother. I divorced our mother when I was ten."

I sat up, shocked silly.

"Dorothy's not ... then she's ... she's my foster mother? All this time she said she was ...."

"No, she's not your foster mother, not technically. She's your father."

"WHAT?"

"She's your father."

"Who the hell ... *father?* What kind of crazy game is this? Who the hell ever knows who their *father* is?"

"I do," she said, simply. "And now you do."

"I think you had better tell it from the top."

She did, and it all stood up, bizarre as it was.

Dorothy and Jubilant's mother (*my* mother!) had been members of a religious sect called the First Principles. I gathered they had a lot of screwy ideas, but the screwiest one of all had to do with something called the "nuclear family." I don't know why they called it that, maybe because it was invented in the era when nuclear power was first harnessed. What it consisted of was a mother and a father, *both living in the same household,* and dozens of kids.

The First Principles didn't go that far; they still adhered to the One Person-One Child convention — and a damn good thing, too, or they might have been lynched instead of queasily tolerated — but they liked the idea of both biological parents living together to raise the two children.

So Dorothy and Gleam (that was her name; they were Glitter and Gleam back in Luna) "married," and Gleam took on the female role for the first child. She conceived it, birthed it, and named it Jubilant.

Then things started to fall apart, as any sane person could have told them it would. I don't know much history, but I know a little about the way things were back on Old Earth. Husbands killing wives, wives killing husbands, parents beating children, wars, starvation; all those things. I don't know how much of that was the result of the nuclear family, but it must have been tough to "marry" someone and find out too late that it was the wrong someone.

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So you took it out on the children. I'm no sociologist, but can see that much.

Their relationship, while it may have glittered and gleamed at first, went steadily downhill for three years. It got to the point that Glitter couldn't even share the same planet with his spouse. But he loved the child and had even come to think of her as his own. Try telling that to a court of law. Modern justiprudence doesn't even recognize the *concept* of fatherhood, any more than it would recognize the divine right of kings. Glitter didn't have a legal leg to stand on. The child belonged to Gleam.

But my mother (*foster* mother, I couldn't yet bring myself to say father) found a compromise. There was no use mourning the fact that he couldn't take Jubilant with him. He had to accept that. But he could take a piece of her. That was me. So he moved to Mercury with the cloned child, changed his sex, and brought me up to adulthood, never saying a word about First Principles.

I was calming down as I heard all this, but it was certainly a revelation. I was full of questions, and for the time, survival was forgotten.

"No, Dorothy isn't a member of the church any longer. That was one of the causes of the split. As far as I know, Gleam is the *only* member today. It didn't last very long. The couples that formed the church pretty much tore each other apart in marital strife. That was why the court granted my divorce; Gleam kept trying to force her religion on me, and when I told my friends about it, they laughed at me. I didn't want that, even at age ten, and told the court I thought my mother was crazy. The court agreed."

"So ... so Dorothy hasn't had her one child yet. Do you think she can still have one? What are the legalities of that?"

"Pretty cut-and-dried, according to Dorothy. The judges don't like it, but it's her birthright, and they can't deny it. She managed to get permission to have you grown because of a loophole in the law, since she was going to Mercury and would be out of the jurisdiction of the Lunar courts. The loophole was closed shortly after you left. So you and I are pretty unique. What do you think about that?"

"I don't know. I think I'd rather have a normal family. What do I say to Dorothy now?"

She hugged me, and I loved her for that. I was feeling young and alone. Her story was still settling in, and I was afraid of what my reaction might be when I digested it to its conclusion.

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"I wouldn't tell her anything. Why should you? She'll probably get around to telling you before you leave for the cometary zone, but if she doesn't, what of it? What does it matter? Hasn't she been a mother to you? Do you have any complaints? Is the biological fact of motherhood all that important? I think not. I think love is more important, and I can see that was there."

"But she's my father! How do I relate to that?"

"Don't even try. I suspect that fathers loved their children in pretty much the same way mothers did, back when fatherhood was more than just insemination."

"Maybe you're right. I think you're right." She held me close in the dark.

"Of course I'm right."

Three hours later, there was a rumble and the violet glow surrounded us again.

We walked into the sunlight hand in hand. The rescue crew was there to meet us, grinning and patting us on the back. They filled our tanks, and we enjoyed the luxury of wasting oxygen to drive away the sweat.

"How bad was it?" I asked the rescue boss.

"Medium-sized. You two are some of the last to be dug out. Did you have a hard time in there?"

I looked at Jubilant, who acted as though she had just been resurrected from the dead, grining like a maniac. I thought about it.

"No. No trouble."

We climbed the rocky slope, and I looked back. The quake had dumped several tons of rock into quicksilver gully. Worse still, the natural dam at the lower end had been destroyed. Most of the mercury had drained out into the broader valley below. It was clear that quicksilver grotto would never be the magic place it had been in my youth. That was a sad thing. I had loved it, and it seemed that I was leaving a lot behind me down there.

I turned my back on it and walked down toward the house and Dorothy.

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Richard Lupoff's latest is a lovely, mordant extrapolation of the relationship between the reporting of news and the making of it . . .

With the Evening News

by RICHARD LUPOFF

Malatesta knocked three times at Garfield's door and pushed it open without waiting for a response. He always did it that way. Garfield hated him for it.

No, he didn't. Not really. He hated Malatesta for a lot of other reasons. He hated him mainly because he was afraid. Work this long and this hard. Make your name a household word. Make ratings that carry over into the entertainment shows. Carry any dumb sitcom or dickflick the network wants to follow you with.

And when the ratings tail away, your neck is under the blade.

He was afraid that Malatesta was going to replace him. That next season it would be the boyish solemnity of that slim, dark face that would look out out of twenty million screens each night. Instead of his own. Could he help it if he was getting a few more years under his belt? What was wrong with the wise uncle newsface? It had worked for others.

Besides, Garfield's show was doing no worse than Andrews' on Affiliated or Coleman's on Intercoastal. Damn bitch Coleman. INA net had figured a female anchorperson would get an automatic half of the audience, let Continental fight over the other half and the pinkos at CEN pick up the crumbs as usual.

Nobody watched a Cultural & Educational Network news show anyhow except overaged radlibs who thought it was a revolutionary act. Or told themselves it was while they collected their junior high school teachers' pension checks.

"Brace yo se'f," Malatesta trilled in his most noisome dialect, "hee come de ratings!"

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"Oh, god," Garfield groaned, "spare me the impressions. Sit down, Marc. You have them there?"

He held out a hand toward the younger man. Malatesta slid into the leather guest chair and held a few sheets of office copier paper toward Garfield. "Sho' fing, Larry."

Garfield's fingers did not quite reach the papers Malatesta extended. "God damn it," he snarled, "give me the fucking ratings." He saw his own hand, carefully manicured. Reaching for the pages drew just the right length of linen cuff beyond his conservative suit jacket.

His hand was liver-spotted and shook slightly.

Damn. Have to keep his hands out of sight when he was on camera. Should be easy enough for an anchorman to do. Thank god, he wasn't the weather man. Pointers, charts, shaking hands.

Malatesta let him have the pages.

Garfield spread them on his desk.

"You're welcome, Larry," Malatesta said.

Garfield looked up at him. "Bastard," he hissed.

He looked at the ratings. They stank.

"Lousy, ain't dey?" Malatesta grinned.

Garfield nodded. "You bet." He glared at Malatesta. "Commodore seen them yet?"

Malatesta's grin widened. He nodded up and down.

"Fuck!" Garfield spat. "What'd he say?"

Malatesta grinned.

"God damn it, Marc! Cut out the games! I asked you a question!"

"Now, now, Larry. Wouldn't you like that nice roving correspondent's niche? Do a li'l taped report on conditions in Sri Lanka, interview the urban-renewal boss in Cologne. It's a cushy berth. Lot of fellas'd love to get it."

"You try and squeeze me out of here, I'll fire your ass so far off this network you won't land a job with CEN. So shut up and let me study these figures."

"Study 'em all you like, Larry. But you know you can't fire me. You try it and the Commodore'd have yo' pelt. No kick upstairs. You'd be over at Voice of America beggin' for a GS-9."

He lit a cigarette and tilted back his chair.

Garfield studied the ratings. The news shows were all way off. That was some consolation. If Andrews and Coleman had been up or even level and he went down, that would be it. A quick-boot to some kind of roving job or some off-screen job altogether. At least they were all in hot water together.

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Maybe he could work something out. Maybe he could save his slot.

He picked up the phone.

"Bridgit!"

She was there. Eager to help. Ought to be. How many secretaries made her kind of salary.

"Bridgit, how did Mr. Malatesta get in here without your buzzing me?"

He gave the younger man a penetrating gaze. Malatesta gazed back.

"He said it was urgent, Mr. Garfield."

"Everything's urgent! I can't have every pipsqueak office boy in this building barging in."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Garfield. He said it was the Commodore's orders. You know we never hesitate when it's the Commodore's orders."

Garfield growled. Malatesta grinned.

"Tummy, Lar'?"

Garfield spoke into the phone. "Bridgit, get hold of Morgan Andrews for me, will you? At ATN."

"I know where he works, Mr. Garfield. Stand by."

Garfield hung up the receiver and glared at Malatesta.

"As for you —"

Malatesta said, "Yes, Larry?"

"Get out. Now, before I throw you out. And next time leave your papers at Mrs. O'Meara's desk. She'll give them to me."

Malatesta slithered up out of his chair. "Ta-ta," he said.

Garfield returned to the ratings sheets. They gave all five nights in the past week, by network. Plus same week last month, same week last year. The demographic breakouts were underneath. Garfield only scanned. The details were unsurprising. The trend was obvious.

His intercom buzzed. He picked it up. "Yes, Bridgit."

"Mr. Andrews at Affiliated."

He grunted some kind of thanks and punched the button.

"Morgan?"

"Yes, Larry. Funny you should call just now. I was looking over the new ratings — you've seen 'em? — and I thought we might have lunch together."

"Fine. Not concerned over antitrust, are you?"

Andrews laughed. A little bit nervously. "Nope-nope-nope."

"Okay. J. P.'s?"

"Roof bar. Okay if I bring a couple of friends?"

Garfield held back a second and a half. "Put 'em on your account. Anyone I know?"

"Friends. Wear a white carnation, Larry."

He clicked off.

Garfield took a check on his field staff, called in his producer for a check on the plans for the night's show, rang up Malatesta.

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Malatesta's secretary said he was unavailable, would ring back.

Garfield dragged his ancient L. C. Smith standard out of its cabinet, ran in some fan-fold carbon-pak copy paper, walked across the room to the wire-service printers, scanned the copy, plodded back to his desk mulling his choice of lead story for the night. He faced an ancient predicament. Major items were mostly dull, mostly slow-breaking. There were some cuties on the wires too, but they didn't mean much.

He picked up the phone again, asked Bridgit to ring his White House man. Summit rumors had been rumbling for weeks but, without anything hard, had eroded from the front pages of the print papers and from the prime-time shows to the weekly pundit panels on the screen.

Garfield got his man, asked if there was any sign yet of a break. To his pleasure, it seemed that there was. He told his man to stay on the beat, he was sending additional manpower.

Bridgit buzzed him again. Malatesta was back at his desk. Garfield told him to get to Washington and backstop the summit story for a few days. Malatesta accepted the assignment without a quarrel, to Garfield's relief.

He looked over the wire copy again. Congress was stumbling over its feet again; there was no interesting campaign in the offing. Major foreign governments were stable. The only wars going on were low-pitched guerrila struggles that offered little in combat footage and less in headline news.

All the specialized wires were dull: business, religion, science, sports.

Larry Garfield sighed, glanced at the big digital wall clock, turned to his L. C. Smith. He couldn't think of anything to write.

Finally he decided to try an ancient trick that he'd learned from a novelist plagued with periodic attacks of writer's block. He held a finger over a page of wire copy, closed his eyes, drew half a dozen circles in the air, plunged his finger onto the paper.

The word he drew was ASKED.

He closed his eyes again and went through the procedure once more. He got CARDINAL. Hah! And it wasn't even the religious wire. Some abstruse story about number theory on the science wire.

Well, ASKED and CARDINAL. He wracked his brain to get some kind of interesting lead with ASKED and CARDINAL in it, managed to bang out a couple of paragraphs. He looked at the clock. It was time to leave.

He put on his hat, walked past Bridgit's desk.

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"Luncheon, Mr. Garfield?"

"J.P.'s," he replied, "Morgan Andrews. Roof bar."

He strode past the lobby guard, used his private key, rode down to the basement garage, clambered into the back seat of a network limo.

"J.P.'s."

The driver hit the starter switch and the car whined into life. Larry leaned back into the cushions, eyes half closed, watching the streets slide past the limo. At least this was something that he got out of his job. No need to compete for a cab or run the risk of a daylight mugger on the street.

At their destination he asked the driver if he'd been having a busy day. He hadn't. Larry told him to call in to the network and wait to bring him back.

He jumped out of the limo and took the steps upward to the front door of the club, the first few two at a stride, the rest one by one. He strode past the doorman. Overhead, the lintel had carved in it in neoroman lettering *John Peter Zenger Society.*

He nodded to the desk clerk, checked his box for urgent messages, threw away a fistfull of trivial mail, took the elevator to the roof bar.

Morgan Andrews was ahead of him, his massive ex-athlete's frame planted stolidly on an oversized barstool. His monogram was worked into the back of the seat in metal.

Garfield slid into his own personalized stool and reached for the drink that was ready the moment he hit the bar.

"How's the wife, Morgan?" he asked.

"Good good good. Asking for you. Here's to it, Larry." Andrews hoisted his own drink, looked through it at Garfield, took a heavy swallow and crashed the heavy, empty glass back onto the bar.

"Yah!" he grunted.

The bartender swapped him a full glass for the empty.

"You said you were going to invite some friends," Garfield said. "They here?"

"Not yet, not yet. Any minute. Larry," he said, "you see the ratings that just came out?"

Garfield nodded. "Bad."

"Yah! ATN came out on top in ten leading markets, that was some comfort for me," Andrews said.

Garfield snorted. "Don't pettifog. We can all rig a few statistics to make ourselves look good. You beat me in ten leading, CBA is tops in total aggregate, JoAnna wins with single males in selected age groups. Pah! You know she went up three points when she stopped wearing a brassiere on camera? Would have done better than that, but they matted her in North

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Dakota at the pectoral line."

He shook his head.

"We're all in hot water. Problem isn't competing with each other. Hell, even Weinberger comes out on top someplace. He must."

Andrews grunted. "Yep yep yep. On Channel 49, University Park."

Garfield laughed bitterly.

"We don't need to beat each other over the head. We need something to get the viewers interested in watching news. Any news. If we can pull the audience, we'll each get our share. But we won't get anywhere squabbling over audience share if there's no audience to share!"

They drank morosely side by side. Then after a few minutes' silence Andrews reared back on his stool and scanned the room. He threw a hand up in greeting.

"There they are!"

Garfield said, "Put those on my tab, pal," swung away from the bar and followed Andrews toward a table in the dining room. Three others had already arrived there: a slim youngish woman with softly waved hair, a studious-looking black with thick eyeglasses and a turtleneck shirt, a serious-faced younger man with horn-rimmed glasses, closely cropped hair and a narrow tie.

"Morgan," the woman cried, "Larry!"

She ran the few steps to them, bussed each affectionately on the cheek. "How is Agatha, Morgan? We really don't see enough of each other. Jordan asks after you both all the time. You know, I think he's just a little bit horny for Agatha.

"Larry, I haven't seen your new apartment yet. When are you going to invite me up for dinner? You know Jordan goes out with road companies when he's polishing a new comedy. I do get lonesome left all alone!"

Andrews and Garfield made vaguely responsive noises to Jo-Anna.

The older man came over, shook hands.

"Hello, Elias, good to see you. Morgan didn't say who the other people were going to be."

Weinberger laughed, pushed his heavy glasses up on his nose. "One round would get us all, Larry." He turned halfway from Garfield. "Have you met Wilson here?"

He indicated the conservatively dressed young man standing uncomfortably at the table.

Garfield shook his head.

Weinberger leaned close to him, spoke into Garfield's ear. "Administration hatchet man. Watch him."

Garfield nodded, walked to the young man. He offered his hand and introduced himself.

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"An honor," the younger man said. "C. Farnsworth Wilson. I just popped up from DC for the day, you know. It's always a stimulating experience, visiting the city here."

Morgan Andrews' hearty voice boomed over the group. "Should we get started?"

They found seats around the snow-linened table. An employee of the club unobtrusively moved partitions on their sliding tracks, making the table and its immediate area into a private dining room.

A waiter brought another round of drinks for them all. Garfield noticed that Wilson, the government man, took milk.

"Ulcer?" Garfield asked.

Wilson grunted noncommittally.

Andrews lifted his glass, looked around the table, said, "To the confounding of all our enemies," upended his glass.

They all laughed and followed suit except Wilson, who sat with his hands in his lap.

"No, but seriously," Andrews said, "the reason I called this meeting was to get you guys all drunk so you'd get back to your shops and mess up your taping and I'll have the only decent show on the air tonight."

"Even that wouldn't help," Weinberger put in.

"All JoAnna has to do is breath," Garfield said.

"You're really much too kind to a poor little newshen," JoAnna replied.

C. Farnsworth Wilson raised a hand to get their attention. "I really have to get out to the airdrome. If you don't mind."

They all gazed at him in silence.

"I'm here to provide a pipeline for you. To and from the administration. We all agree that the old days of antagonism between the administration and the media cannot be permitted to return.

"Therefore we will assist you, as we have these past years. But you will really have to work out your basic difficulties yourselves. You will have to set your own strategic objectives." He looked pointedly at his watch. "And I have to make my flight."

Morgan Andrews cleared his throat.

"Ah, thank you, Wilson." He looked around the group, his heavy head moving ponderously on his thick neck. "The problem is simple enough. The people are just not interested in what's going on.

"As Larry here mentioned earlier in the bar, we aren't losing audience to one another. We're *all* losing audience. Nobody bothers to pay attention any more."

JoAnna snorted. "What are they doing then? Watching game show reruns on the indies?"

"Some, yeah." It was Elias

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Weinberger. He took off his heavy-framed glasses and gestured with them, just as he did on screen.

"You have the full figures, Elias?" asked Andrews.

Weinberger nodded. "Total viewing audience is off somewhat during news hour, but not nearly as much as news audience. The difference is accounted for by the indies. Game shows, sitcom repeats, old movies.

"The rest of the audience loss is scattered. One of my people did a study of it. People are listening to music. A surprising number of them are playing music themselves. Reading. Taking walks. Doing home projects. Building things. Baking. It's really quite amazing. Visiting friends. Attending lectures and taking courses. Really remarkable."

"But why, Mr. Weinberger?" It was Wilson, the Washington man, asking earnestly.

Before Weinberger answered, JoAnna Coleman broke in.

"The news shows are just tired, Mr. Wilson. We've had the same old faces, sick of hearing our voices. That's why INA's rating went up when we changed anchorperson."

Garfield snorted angrily. "I think it's the time that's at fault. I've been trying to convince the Commodore to slide us down farther into prime. Then we'd get audience."

"Why can't you get it where you are now?"

"Because the news hour is based on the notion of the working man getting home from his commute and sitting down with a martini to watch the news before dinner. That's all changed now. We need a better time slot."

"That isn't it at all." Andrews overrode the conversation with sheer richness of voice. "It's our format. The shows are too much alike and people are sick of them. We need more coverage, more location footage. Audiences are sick of talking heads."

"Nonsense," snapped JoAnna.

"Don't get too smug, sweetheart! Novelty pays for a while, but they'll get tired of talking bosoms soon enough too."

Elias Weinberger waved for attention. While the table was quieting, their lunch arrived and silver began to clatter against chinaware. As soon as the room was again secure, Weinberger resumed.

"There's nothing wrong with talking heads. It's true that people like location shots, no question. But what all our studies show —"

"You cult-n-ed boys are great on studies," Garfield cut him off bitterly. "Too bad you're weak on news."

"Now, now," JoAnna soothed, "let's hear him out, Larry."

Weinberger said, "Thank you."

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He paused ostentatiously for a drink of water. "We know that people watch news when we have interesting stories for them. When the news is dull, they do something else."

He paused again, gathered nods and grunts of affirmation or at least of assent.

"All right, then. But there's a kind of inflation or devaluation of news values that we have to allow for. You remember a few years ago when all the pro sports were so popular. The leagues figured to cash in by adding teams and lengthening their seasons and setting up those byzantine playoff schedules."

Again the others nodded.

"And the result was what? Not more audience, but less. Not increased public excitement, but boredom. People at home stopped watching, people in the street lost track of what the teams were. They wound up with empty seats in the World Series and the Super Bowl. Even that was just a repeat of what had happened earlier with boxing and roller derby."

"Why, Elias, I didn't know you were such a sports fan," JoAnna cooed.

"He's a frustrated fullback," Andrews growled.

Weinberger shook his head. "Just facts. Anybody who does a little digging can get the figures."

Wilson tapped his water goblet for attention. "I think we all understand the problem, at least in broad terms. Mr. Andrews invited me here to provide some government viewpoint on this situation, and I should really like to get on with solutions."

Andrews harrumphed commandingly. "You're right, of course." He looked at his colleagues. "Well, then, I take it that we agree that merely changing our times or format will not do what needs to be done. We need to get some more interesting events to cover. That's where the administration can help, in return, of course, for the continued support of ourselves."

Wilson said, "Quite."

Andrews cleared his throat nervously. "Ah, no one is making notes, I see. I trust that nobody is recording this discussion either?" he ended with an inquiry.

Wilson said, "The room is clean."

"Do you have figures, Elias, of viewer response to various types of stories?" asked Garfield.

Weinberger's eyes crinkled merrily behind his thick glasses, his dark face creased with a huge smile. "You commercial news people love to put down CEN, but you don't mind picking our brains a bit, do you?"

Garfield said only, "Well."

"Okay," Weinberger resumed.

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"I do happen to recall looking over some comprehensive figures very recently. If you don't need the exact percentages — I have those at the shop — I can give you the sequence."

"Yes, yes," rumbled Andrews.

"Very well. Best we've ever done — this is aggregate for all coverage, no breakout of commercial versus cult-n-ed or net versus net."

Andrews rumbled, "Yes."

"Best we've ever done," Weinberger recited, "is a presidential assassination. Of course, we don't get our peak audience for the act itself, because we aren't allowed to run any promos in advance."

"We won't change that," said Wilson.

"Say," JoAnna interrupted, "I don't mean to pry, Mr. Wilson, but what part of the administration did you say you were from? Not the FCC."

"No." Wilson smiled blandly, "not the FCC."

"Well, then," Weinberger resumed, "we can get live coverage of a good assassination by planning it for another event that we know will draw a good audience. And then, of course, there's the state funeral, manhunt coverage on the assassins, taped reruns of everything, analyses."

Wilson was shaking his head, at first barely perceptibly, then more and more vigorously.

"Mr. Wilson?" Weinberger said when he noticed.

"I'm sorry," Wilson said, "no assassinations. We're concerned with your ratings, but there are too many other factors. Do you have any idea what a national day of mourning, alone, costs the economy? What it does to the federal budget?"

"Umm," said Weinberger.

"What else do we have?" Andrews put in. "I think we'll have to concede on assassinations, Elias."

Weinberger took off his glasses and studied them. "Let's see," he said, "if we can't have assassinations, funerals of ex-presidents always do well. In fact, big funerals are always good for ratings."

"Bad for sponsors, though," Garfield said. "Had a chat with the Commodore last time around on a burial. Bad for business generally, lot of commercials are canceled, other shows have to be rescheduled, stores close."

"Nope nope," said Andrews. "Think you're right, Larry. Do you agree with that, Mr. Wilson?"

"Definitely. Something positive."

JoAnna said, "I suppose that rules out wars, too."

Wilson lifted a crystal water tumbler and sipped thoughtfully at it. The others sat, waiting for the young man to speak.

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"Not necessarily," he said at last.

"Well then...."

"Well, it's a very complicated question. We don't want a nuclear war, and there's not much point in a non nuclear major power war."

"Why no nuclear war?" Garfield asked.

"Oh, really, sir," Wilson said, not concealing any of his annoyance, "I'm surprised that you have to ask that. Do you have any idea what a nuclear war would cost? If you can understand the loss an assassination would incur, I'm really amazed that you would seriously propose a nuclear war.

"Besides, there's been so much friction with the Congress under recent administrations. No. Absolutely out of the question. No nuclear war. And no brush fires, I should think, although we could provide one if you really wish."

"I don't think so," Andrews said. "Larry? JoAnna?" He looked for their responses. "Elias?"

They shook their heads.

"Listen, though, listen," Andrews said, "how about somebody foreign? You know, the president of France. Or some bigshot in Asia. Or Britain. They put on first-class funerals, Westminster Abbey and all...."

Weinberger said, "That's a good try, Morgan, but it won't quite make it."

"Why not?"

"Because the more remote from American day-to-day life, the less emotional impact it's going to have, and the less the emotional impact, the smaller the audience. And the *closer* to Mister-and-Miz Viewer, the more we're going to run into that commercial depressant effect. So it just won't work."

Andrews smacked his hands together in annoyance. "Damn," he grumbled, "I guess you're right. It's a perfect catch 22, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Weinberger agreed.

"What about the pope?" said JoAnna.

"The pope?" Weinberger repeated.

JoAnna sneered. "You cult-needs are so damned doctrinaire about your radlibism, you wouldn't run a story on religion if Jesus personally walked into your studios and performed a miracle."

"Well, that isn't a fair comment. We just don't promote any sect, that's all. But we ran that whole series last summer on the radical zen-UFO movements on the West Coast."

"How'd it do?" Garfield asked.

"Bombed."

"But you see," JoAnna persisted, "assassination of the pope would be a sensation; then we'd run right into a great funeral sequence, and then we'd have the papal

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election, and that's always first-class footage. The College of Cardinals assembling, the suspense, puffs of black smoke. They lap it up."

"Too sectarian," Weinberger insisted.

Garfield said, "I'm not so sure. Do Catholics stop buying when the pope dies? Would we have to cancel commercials?"

"Strictly marginal." JoAnna was pushing her idea. "And then there's a chance to do special memorial cassettes for people who like to relive things like that. Even picture albums, you know print media isn't entirely dead."

Morgan Andrews said, "What do you think, Wilson? Papal assassination?"

Wilson steepled his fingers beneath his chin, pursed his lips, finally said, "I do kind of like it. But I'm just not sure."

"Any of us Catholics?" Andrews asked.

"I was raised as one," JoAnna put in.

"Not good enough."

"I'm in good standing with the Church," Wilson said. "I'm sure they'd go for it. No problem there. It's just that — somehow, I don't think the appeal is quite wide enough. It would work, but I think you can do better. Can we just hold this idea in abeyance? "And can we get some coffee?"

Waiters brought hot drinks, Andrews lighted a cigar, and Weinberger a graceful pipe.

"Something that you said gave me an idea, I think," Garfield said to Weinberger.

"Yes? What was it?"

"I'm not quite certain. Something about a religion series you'd run."

"No," Weinberger replied, drawing carefully on his pipe. "No," he repeated, "religious shows bomb, is what I said."

"No, Elias, it wasn't that part of it. It was the part about UFOs. There used to be a lot of pizzazz in space stories. The Commodore still likes to talk about the old Apollo days. Says the first moon landing was one of the greatest triumphs in the history of commercial broadcasting."

"Mmm, now that you mention it, yes. But the public got tired very fast. Ratings dropped so badly, don't you remember? You were around the industry then —"

"Yes," conceded Garfield ruefully, "I was an assistant station manager in Minnesota."

"Right. They lost interest so fast, we had to cancel the last few Apollo flights for lack of interest."

The room was stilled by the sound of a cold malignant chuckle. It was the first sign of emotion displayed by C. Farnsworth Wilson. "Pardon," he said, "I was too

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young to be involved with that, but there are still people serving time in minor bureaucratic jobs because of that miscalculation.

"I mean, there just isn't much of a market for surplus Saturn-V boosters. We had a devil of a time dreaming up ways to shoot those things off."

"Still," Garfield persisted, "I think there's something we can get out of this. Now look —" he pointed at each of the others in turn "— UFO stories have made usable copy for decades. Every time the news falls off and we hit a silly season, we can always arrange for some hick to take a free ride to Pluto or somewhere, and the viewers never fail to go for it.

"Now if we could only combine the really solid, hard-news tension of an Apollo landing with the staying power that the UFO stories have shown, I think we'd have something that would goose our ratings right back up where they belong and keep them up there for months. Maybe even years."

Morgan Andrews looked concerned. "We'd have to lay it out very carefully, Larry. Something like that has a lot of drama to it, and if it peaks too soon, it could be a flash in the pan and go down the drain overnight."

"I realize that, Morgan. We're not a bunch of amateurs."

"Good solid background," Weinberger said. "Plenty of potential for interviews, scholarly in-depth coverage."

"Not too heavy," JoAnna conceded. "It does have possibilities."

Andrews asked Wilson what he thought of the notion.

"I'll say this," Wilson responded, "I like it a lot better than the other idea. Universal appeal. Make the administration look good too. Boost appropriations for the defense establishment, get NASA out of the doldrums. And not too controversial, either.

"Hmm," he paused for a sip of water. "Nice chance to rally the nation behind the President. That would be useful, too.

"Yes," he concluded, "I really like it. Real contact with real aliens, is that what you have in mind?"

Garfield and Andrews nodded in unison.

"Yes," Wilson repeated, "I do like that a lot better than a papal assassination. I'm sure my superiors will buy it."

"I think that's that, then," Andrews chuckled heartily. He rose from his place at the table. "Gentlemen — and lady — I think we've made a major contribution to our profession today."

They all rose and started for the door, pausing to shake hands with Wilson as they made their way from the club.

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Larry Garfield shook Wilson's hand vigorously. "I've got a limo waiting," Larry said. "Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"Thank you, no," Wilson answered, "I've got government transportation at my disposal."

"Fine, fine. Morgan?"

"Why, thank you, Larry," Andrews boomed. "I'll be pleased."

Together they made their way downstairs. Garfield was utterly elated. "I can hardly wait till this thing starts to break," he bubbled to Andrews. "I can hardly wait till I see that bastard Malatesta's face, stuck on that dinky summit story while we work out this one."

"You're right about that," Andrews chuckled agreeably. "It's going to take a lot of energy and dedication, but I never really doubted that we could lick this problem."

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Mr. Drake ("Arclight," April 1973) takes a classic fantasy theme and gives it a fresh and offbeat twist: a real chiller.

Something Had To Be Done

by DAVID DRAKE

"He was out in the hall just a minute ago, sir," the pinched-faced WAC said, looking up from her typewriter in irritation. "You can't mistake his face."

Capt. Richmond shrugged and walked out of the busy office. Blinking in the dim marble hallway were a dozen confused civilians, bussed in for their preinduction physicals. No one else was in the hallway. The thick-waisted officer frowned, then thought to open the door of the men's room. "Sergeant Morzek?" he called.

Glass clinked within one of the closed stalls, and a deep voice with a catch in it grumbled, "Yeah, be right with you." Richmond thought he smelled gin.

"You the other ghoul?" the voice questioned as the stall swung open. Any retort Richmond might have made withered when his eyes took in the cadaverous figure in ill-tailored greens. Platoon sergeant's chevrons on the sleeves and below them a longer row of service stripes than the captain remembered having seen before. God, this walking corpse might have served in World War II! Most of the ribbons ranked above the sergeant's breast pockets were unfamiliar, but Richmond caught the little V for valor winking in the center of a silver star. Even in these medal-happy days in Southeast Asia they didn't toss many of those around.

The sergeant's cheeks were hollow, his fingers grotesquely thin where they rested on top of the door or clutched the handles of his zippered AWOL bag. Where no moles squattered, his skin was as white as a convict's; but the moles were almost everywhere, hands

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face, dozens and scores of them, crowding together in welted obscenity.

The segeant laughed starkly. "Pretty, aren't I? The docs tell me I got too much sun over there and it gave me runaway warts. Hell, four years is enough time for it to."

"Umm," Richmond grunted in embarrassment, edging back into the hall to have something to do. "Well, the car's in back ... if you're ready, we can see the Lunkowskis."

"Yeah, Christ," the sergeant swore, "that's what I came for, to see the Lunkowskis." He shifted his bag as he followed the captain, and it clinked again. Always before, the other man on the notification team had been a stateside officer like Richmond himself. He had heard that a few low-casualty outfits made a habit of letting whoever knew the dead man best accompany the body home, but this was his first actual experience with the practice. He hoped it would be his last.

Threading the green Ford through the heavy traffic of the city center, Richmond said, "I take it Pfc. Lunkowski was one of your men?"

"Yeah, Stevie-boy was in my platoon for about three weeks," Morzek agreed with a chuckle. "Lost six men in that time and he was the last. Six out of twenty-nine, not very damn good, was it?"

"You were under heavy attack?"

"Hell, no, mostly the dinks were letting us alone for a change. We were out in the middle of War Zone C, you know, most Christ-bitten stretch of country you ever saw. No dinks, no trees — they'd all been defoliated. Not a damn thing but dust and each other's company."

"Well, what did happen?" Richmond prompted. Traffic had thinned somewhat among the blocks of old buildings, and he began to look for house numbers.

"Oh, mostly they just died," Morzek said. He yawned alcoholically. "Stevie, now, he got blown to hell by a grenade."

Richmond had learned when he was first assigned to notification duty not to dwell on the ways his ... missions had died. The possibilities varied from unpleasant to ghastly. He studiously avoided saying anything more to the sergeant beside him until he found the number he wanted. "One sixteen. This must be the Lunkowskis'".

Morzek got out on the curb side, looking more skeletal than before in the dappled sunlight. He held his AWOL bag.

"You can leave that in the car," Richmond suggested. "I'll lock up."

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"Naw, I'll take it in," the sergeant said as he waited for Richmond to walk around the car. "You know, this is every damn thing I brought from Nam? They didn't bother to open it at Travis, just asked me what I had in it. 'A quart of gin,' I told 'em, 'but I won't have it long,' and they waved me through to make my connections. One advantage to this kind of trip."

A bell chimed far within the house when Richmond pressed the button. It was cooler than he had expected on the pine-shaded porch. Miserable as these high, dark old houses were to heat, the design made a world of sense in the summer.

A light came on inside. The stained glass window left of the door darkened, and a latch snicked open. "Please do come in," invited a soft-voiced figure hidden by the dark oak panel. Morzek grinned inappropriately and led the way into the hall, brightly lighted by an electric chandelier.

"Mr. Lunkowski?" Richmond began to the wispy little man who had admitted them. "We are —"

"But, yes, you are here to tell us when Stefan shall come back, are you not?" Lunkowski broke in. "Come into the sitting room, please. Anna and my daughter Rose are there."

"Ah, Mr. Lunkowski," Richmond tried to explain as he followed, all too conscious of the sardonic grin on Morzek's face, "you have been informed by telegram that Pfc. Lunkowski was—"

"Was killed, yes," said the younger of the two red-haired women as she got up from the sofa. "But his body will come back to us soon, will he not? The man on the telephone said?"

She was gorgeous, Richmond thought, cool and assured, half smiling as her hair cascaded over her left shoulder like a thick copper conduit. Disconcerted as he was by the whole situation, it was a moment before he realized that Sgt. Morzek was saying, "Oh, the coffin's probably at the airport now, but there's nothing in it but a hundred and fifty pounds of gravel. Did the telegram tell you what happened to Stevie?"

"Sergeant!" Richmond shouted. "You drunken —"

"Oh, calm down, Captain," Morzek interrupted bleakly. "The Lunkowskis, they understand. They want to hear the whole story, don't they?"

"Yes." There was a touch too much sibilance in the word as it crawled from the older woman, Stefan Lunkowski's mother. Her hair was too grizzled now to have more than a tinge of red in it, enough to rust the tight ringlets

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clinging to her skull like a helmet of mail. Without quite appreciating its importance, Richmond noticed that Mr. Lunkowski was standing in front of the room's only door.

With perfect nonchalance, Sgt. Morzek sat down on an overstuffed chair, laying his bag across his knees. "Well," he said, "there was quite a report on that one. We told them how Stevie was trying to booby-trap a white phosphorous grenade — fix it to go off as soon as some dink pulled the pin instead of four seconds later. And he goofed."

Mrs. Lunkowski's breath whistled out very softly. She said nothing. Morzek waited for further reaction before he smiled horribly and added: "He burned. A couple pounds of willie pete going blooie, well ... it keeps burning all the way through you. Like I said, the coffin's full of gravel."

"My god, Morzek," the captain whispered. It was not the sergeant's savage grin that froze him but the icy-eyed silence of the three Lunkowskis.

"The grenade, that was real," Morzek concluded. "The rest of the report was a lie."

Rose Lunkowski reseated herself gracefully on a chair in front of the heavily draped windows. "Why don't you start at the beginning, sergeant?" she said with a thin smile that did not show her teeth. "There is much we would like to know before you are gone."

"Sure," Morzek agreed, tracing a mottled forefinger across the pigmented callosities on his face. "Not much to tell. The night after Stevie got assigned to my platoon, the dinks hit us. No big thing. Had one fellow dusted off with brass in his ankle from his machine gun blowing up, that was all. But a burst of AK fire knocked Stevie off his tank right at the start."

"What's all this about?" Richmond complained. "If he was killed by rifle fire, why say a grenade —"

"Silence!" The command crackled like heel plates on concrete.

Sgt. Morzek nodded. "Why, thank you, Mr. Lunkowski. You see, the captain there doesn't know the bullets didn't hurt Stevie. He told us his flak jacket had stopped them. It couldn't have and it didn't. I saw it that night, before he burned it — five holes to stick your fingers through, right over the breast pocket. But Stevie was fine, not a mark on him. Well, Christ, maybe he'd had a bandolier of ammo under the jacket. I had other things to think about."

Morzek paused to glance around. "All this talk, I could sure use a drink. I killed my bottle back at the Federal Building."

"You won't be long," the girl hissed.

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Morzek grinned. "They broke up the squadron, then," he rasped on, "gave each platoon a sector of War Zone C to cover to stir up the dinks. There's more life on the moon than there was on the stretch we patrolled. Third night out, one of the gunners died. They flew him back to Saigon for an autopsy, but damned if I know what they found. Galloping malaria, we figured.

"Three nights later, another guy died. Dawson on three-six ... Christ, the names don't matter. Sometime after midnight, his track commander woke up, heard him moaning. We got him back to Quan Loi to a hospital, but he never came out of it. The lieutenant thought he got wasp stung on the neck — here, you know?" Morzek touched two fingers to his jugular. "Like he was allergic. Well, it happens."

"But what about Stefan?" Mrs. Lunkowski asked. "The others do not matter."

"Yes, finish it quickly, sergeant," the younger woman said, and this time Richmond did catch the flash of her teeth.

"We had a third death," Morzek said agreeably, stroking the zipper of his AWOL bag back and forth. "We were all jumpy by then. I doubled the guard, two men awake on every track. Three nights later, and nobody in the platoon remembered anything from twenty-four hundred hours till Riggs' partner blinked at ten of one and found him dead.

"In the morning, one of the boys came to me. He'd seen Stevie slip over to Riggs, he said, but he was zonked out on grass and didn't think it really had happened until he woke up in the morning and saw Riggs under a poncho. By then, he was scared enough to tell the whole story. Well, we were all jumpy."

"You killed Stefan." It was not a question but a flat statement.

"Oh, hell, Lunkowski," Morzek said absently, "what does it matter who rolled the grenade into his bunk? The story got around and ... something had to be done."

"Knowing what you know, you came here?" Mrs. Lunkowski murmured liquidly. "You must be mad."

"Naw, I'm not crazy, I'm just sick." The sergeant brushed his left hand over his forehead. "Malignant melanoma, the docs told me. Twenty-six years in the goddamn army, and in another week or two I'd be *warted* to death.

"Captain," he added, turning his cancerous face toward Richmond, "you better leave through the window."

"Neither of you will leave!" snarled Rose Lunkowski as she stepped toward the men.

Morzek lifted a fat gray cylinder from his bag. "Know what

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this is, honey?" he asked conversationally.

Richmond screamed and leaped for the window. Rose ignored him, slashing her hand out for the phosphorous grenade. Drapery wrapping the captain's body shielded him from glass and splintered window frame as he pitched out into the yard.

He was still screaming there when the blast of white fire bulged the walls of the house.

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THE ROCKETING DUTCHMEN

Quite frequently I get books, magazines, and miscellaneous printed material in the mails, stuff I haven't requested and didn't expect. My first impulse in such cases is to look at the index, if there is one, or riffle the pages, if there is no index, to see if my name is mentioned. Such mention is often (not always, however) the reason the material is sent to me.

When the object in question is a subject on which I have expressed myself in some sardonic way, I am particularly suspicious. For instance, a rather considerable time ago I got something called "UFO Symposium — 1973," and in it was an article by Stanton T. Friedman, a gentleman with whom I am not acquainted.

The article contained a section called "Science Fiction Vs. Ufology" which begins, "Many people are surprised when I point out that two of the most noted science fiction and science writers Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke are both quite vehement in their anti-UFO sentiments."

That Friedman meets people who are "surprised" at this indicates, I suppose, the level of the circles he moves in. After all, why should the fact that Arthur and I are s.f. writers lead people to

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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This month marks the 35th anniversary of the appearance of Isaac Asimov's very first published sf story ("Marooned Off Vesta," in the March 1939 issue of *Amazing*). A good excuse for an update on new books by Dr. Asimov:

Recently published:

#148 - *Asimov On Astronomy*, Doubleday, $8.95. A collection of F&SF essays on astronomy from 1959 through 1966, carefully updated.

149 - *The Birth of the United States*, Houghton Mifflin, $5.95. The second volume of a history of the U.S.

150 - *Have You Seen These?* Nesfa Press, $5.95. A collection of eight sf stories from the 1950's, not hitherto anthologized, published in limited edition for Asimov's guest-of-honorship at Boskone II.

151 - *Before The Golden Age*, Doubleday, $16.95. Giant collection of sf from 1930 to 1938, with autobiographical comments (F&SF, *Books*, Dec. 1974)

152 - *Our World In Space*, New York Graphic, $19.95. Large coffee-table book, with artwork by Robert McCall.

153 - *How Did We Find Out About Germs?* Walker, $4.95. Science history for 10-year-olds.

154 - *Asimov's Annotated Paradise Lost*, Doubleday, $16.95. Another giant Asimov annotation.

155 - *Tales of the Black Widowers*, Doubleday, $5.95. Collection of mystery short stories.

Forthcoming:

156 - *Earth: Our Crowded Spaceship*, John Day. A book on population for the 10 to 15 age group.

157 - *Asimov On Chemistry*, Doubleday. A collection of F&SF essays on chemistry from 1959 through 1966, updated.

158 - *How Did We Find Out About Vitamins?* Walker. Science history for 10-year-olds.

The Best of Isaac Asimov, Doublday. American edition of a book published in Great Britain in 1973.

How Did We Find Out About Comets, Walker.

How Did We Find Out About Energy, Walker.

The Solar System, Follett. Three science books for youngsters.

The Ends of the Earth, Weybright and Talley. Adult book on polar regions.

Of Matters Great and Small, Doubleday. The 11th collection of F&SF essays.

Our Federal Union, Houghton Mifflin. The third volume of a history of the U.S.

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suppose that we have forefeited our intelligence and must surely believe any mystic cult that seems to have some elements in common with science fiction?

Friedman goes on to quote me and to add his own asides, designed, I presume, to smash me into silence. Thus he quotes me as saying, "The energy requirements for interstellar travel are so great that it is inconceivable to me that any creatures piloting their ships across the vast depths of space would do so only in order to play games with us over a period of decades. If they want to make contact, they would *make* contact; if not, they would save their energy."

To this, Friedman says, in parentheses: "(What egos we earthlings have! Are we worth contacting?)"

Friedman has obviously quoted me without reading the quote. I said "*If* they want to make contact —" I am perfectly ready to admit that we may not be worth contacting, but in that case "they would save their energy" — and go away.

Imagine the ego of the Friedmans who believe that perhaps we are not worth contacting but that we are nevertheless so fascinating that somehow the flying saucers keep nosing about our planets by the thousands over a period of decades, like rocketing Dutchmen doomed to circle Earth forever without landing, and condemned, further, to keep displaying themselves to us like male pigeons in heat.

Friedman then quotes a statement of mine that concludes: "I will continue to assume that every reported sighting is either a hoax, a mistake, or something that can be explained in a fashion that does not involve spaceships from the distant stars."

And Friedman, assuming a jocose familiarity, says, "(How about the nearby ones, Isaac?)"

Alas, Mr. Friedman,* even the nearby stars are distant.

Friedman goes on to urge me to write a non-fiction book about flying saucers saying that "cases like the Betty and Barney Hill case are far more exciting and interesting than any of Asimov's stories." Well, perhaps, Mr. Friedman, but they are also much more fictional.

But if not a book, I shall write an article on the matter. Goodness knows, I have stated my views of flying saucers a number of times, but I have never done so in an article of this series. Let me do so now in question-and-answer fashion:

**I myself prefer not to assume a familiarity that does not exist.*

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1) *Why do you insist on calling them "flying saucers"? Isn't that unfair ridicule? Why not call them UFOs, a more sober term?*

UFO stands for "unidentified flying object." If I discuss the matter with someone who agrees that these manifestations, whatever they may be, are, in fact, unidentified, and does not insist on identifying them, then I will gladly discuss UFOs as soberly as possible. To anyone, however, who insists on identifying them as spaceships piloted by extraterrestrials, the objects are *not* unidentified and are therefore *not* UFOs. In that case I call them flying saucers, which is the term the flying saucer enthusiasts themselves used before they decided to try for respectability.

2) *Do you deny that there are other intelligent life-forms in the Universe?*

I certainly do not deny that. As long ago as September 1963, I wrote an F&SF article entitled "Who's Out There" in which I followed the arguments of Carl Sagan to the effect that there could be numerous civilizations in the Universe.

Then, in collaboration with Stephen H. Dole, I wrote a book, *Planets for Man* (Random House, 1964), which took up the matter in greater detail and from a slightly different viewpoint and which advanced the suggestion that there were numerous life-bearing planets in the Universe.

Let me repeat that argument very briefly —

No one really knows how many galaxies there are in the Universe; certainly many billions. A hundred billion is the figure I usually use. Even if we confined ourselves to one galaxy only, our own Milky Way Galaxy, we still have a system that contains 135,000,000,000 stars.

Current theories of stellar formation suggest the invariable formation of planetary systems when a star is born, so we can say our Galaxy contains 135,000,000,000 planetary systems, each containing perhaps a dozen planets and half a dozen large satellites.

Of these better than a trillion cold bodies, some are too far from their star to be Earth-like, some too near. Some might have rotations that are too slow, or orbits that are too eccentric, to allow a comfortable weather pattern. Some might circle stars which are too cool to supply the necessary energy for life, or too hot and therefore too short-lived to give life the necessary time to evolve. Some might circle stars that are parts of multiple systems, or stars that pulse, or stars that, in other ways, make the environment too uncomfortable.

Even taking all this into account, Dole, making fair estimates in the

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light of the astronomy of the early 1960s, concluded that there might be as many as 640,000,000 Earth-like planets — planets with roughly Earth-mass, Earth-temperature and Earth-chemistry, and with an Earth-like orbit and an Earth-like Sun — in our Galaxy.

This is not too generous an estimate, since it means that only one planetary body out of 4,000 is suitable and that only one star out of about 210 has an Earth-like planet.

Yet perhaps it *is* too generous if we take into account astronomical developments of the last decade. Since about 90 percent of the stars of the Galaxy are in the Galactic nucleus, some 90 percent of the Earth-like planets ought to be there, too, if we assume even distribution.

The nuclei of galaxies may, however, be the scenes of violent activity — quasars, explosions, black holes, etc. — and it may only be in the spiral arms of a galaxy (where we are) that conditions are quiet enough for planets to be truly Earth-like. In which case, we might perhaps estimate only 64,000,000 Earth-like planets in our Galaxy.

However, the more Earth-like planets there are, the better the case for flying saucers, so let's be generous and keep the larger figure of 640,000,000.

By current theories of the origin of life, any planet that has an Earth-like environment will inevitably develop life. What we are saying then, is that there may be 640,000,000 life-bearing planets in our Galaxy — and life more or less as we know it, too.

Now comes the point at which speculation becomes thinner. On how many of these life-bearing planets does an intelligent species develop, and on how many does this intelligent species develop a civilization?

The only thing we can use as a starting point is Earth itself, the one life-bearing planet we actually know. On Earth, life has existed for some 3,000,000,000 years, and civilization has existed for, at most, some 10,000 years. This means that non-civilized Earth outstretches civilized Earth by 300,000 to 1.

If we assume Earth to be average and this to be a general rule, and that life started at different times in different places, we can assume that civilization exists on one out of every 300,000 life-bearing planets. In that case we have about 2,150 civilizations in our Galaxy.

As for an *industrial* civilization, we have had one for two hundred years out of our ten thousand years of civilization. In other words, our non-industrial civilization outweights our industrial technology by 50 to 1.

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If we suppose that 1 out of 50 civilizations in our Galaxy have reached the industrial stage, then there are some 43 industrial civilizations in our Galaxy.

If we further suppose that our own industrial technology is about average, as such things go, then half of these industrial civilizations — say 21 — are more advanced than ours and are capable, perhaps, of space travel.

That's just in our Galaxy. If this sort of reasoning holds for all galaxies then there are, perhaps, as many as two trillion advanced civilizations in the Universe. But then, I suppose even the most convinced flying saucer enthusiast would agree to eliminate other galaxies as the source of our visitations and be willing to confined himself to our own single Galaxy. That would still leave 21 possible civilizations wandering around the footless halls of space, and surely these are enough to account for flying saucers, if flying saucers are spaceships.

3) *Well, then, why are you so skeptical of the possibility that spaceships guided by extra-terrestrial intelligence are visiting Earth?*

For one thing, the distances disturb me. Imagine all the 640,000,000 life-bearing planets distributed randomly through the Galaxy. They would then be, on the average, about 45 light-years apart. The 21 planets with advanced industrial civilizations on them would be, on the average, 13,500 light-years apart.

With the nearest home-planet of flying saucers 13,500 light-years away, the chance of visiting us would seem small.

Since the speed of light is the limiting speed at which a spaceship can move toward us, one coming to us from even the nearest advanced civilization would take 13,500 years (by stay-at-home time on their native world) to reach us and, very likely, ten times that long. It seems doubtful to me that, under those circumstances, ship after ship would buzz around us, for year after year, like bees around clover. We can't be either that interesting or that important.

4) *But suppose we just happen to be in luck as far as the distance of the nearest advanced civilization is concerned? And why are you so certain that the speed of light is the ultimate limit?*

I don't insist on being categorical about such things. Assuming random distribution, some advanced civilizations may clump together, some be fearfully isolated. It may just happen that Earth is only 100 light-years from a very advanced civilization. This would be tremendously unlikely, but there is no evidence one way or the other, and it *may* be so.

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Then, too, even if the original centers of the civilizations are far, far apart, and if none is particularly close to us, each may nevertheless be the nucleus of a growing Galactic Empire, and there may be outposts of some Empire on some of the nearer stars. There is no evidence for this either, but it *may* be so.

Then, too, perhaps advanced civilization may learn to circumvent the speed-of-light limit without violating relativity. Perhaps they can learn to make use of hyperspace or of a techyonic drive or something that we, in the feeble state of our own technology, can't put words to, and don't have concepts for. This doesn't seem very likely, actually, but it *may* be so.

Perhaps, then, distance is unimportant to the advanced civilizations. Perhaps they can cover 100 light-years or even 13,500 light-years with no greater difficulty than we can fly across the Atlantic Ocean.

5) *But if all that is so, what are your objections to the concept of flying saucers? Why might not ships be exploring Earth freely and frequently?*

If we ignore the question of distance, there remains that of motive. If these rocketing Dutchmen are buzzing around Earth deliberately and for some rational reason, it must be because Earth interests them. But what on Earth can possibly interest them?

It is natural (if perhaps egotistic) to assume that to any outworlder the most interesting thing about Earth is man and his civilization. But if the flying saucers are investigating us, why don't they come down and greet us? They should be intelligent enough to work out who our spokesmen are and where our centers of population are and how to go about making contact with our governments.

Nor is it conceivable they can be afraid of us. If their technology is such that they can cover multi-light-year distances without trouble then they can easily protect themselves against any puny weapons we can turn against them. Would an American warship be afraid to land an exploration party on an island occupied by chimpanzees?

If there is something about our atmosphere or our surface that they find deadly or just unpleasant, they are surely intelligent enough to communicate with us by some sort of long-distance transmission — radio, if nothing else. If not words and language then some signal obviously born of rationality.

On the other hand, if they are interested in us, but do *not* wish to make contact with us; if they do not wish to interfere in any way with a developing civilization, they are certainly intelligent enough and advanced

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enough to be able to study us in whatever detail they need, without ever letting us be aware of them. By letting us be aware of them, they *are* interfering with us.

And if it is something else than man that interests them, then what? No, they should either come down and say hello, or they should go away. If they do neither, they are not intelligently-guided spaceships.

6) *But how can you be sure you understand their motives? Perhaps they don't care to communicate with us, but, on the other hand, don't care if we see them.*

Ah, but if you keep on piling up the conditions you need to improve your case, you come very rapidly to the point of the totally unconvincing.

To get rid of the object of distance, you must *assume* at least one civilization improbably near to us, and you must *assume* the achievement of faster-than-light travel. To get rid of the puzzle of their behavior, you have to *assume* they find Earth interesting enough to pester repeatedly, but ourselves of so little interest they won't talk to us, while, on the other hand, they don't care if we see them.

The more assumptions of this sort you must make, the weaker your case.

Actually, none of these assumptions have any support, whatever. The only function they serve is to explain flying saucers. One can then use the flying saucers themselves as an argument to say that the assumptions must be correct. This is arguing in a circle, one of the chief delights of the intellectually feeble.

7) *Now wait, there is certainly direct evidence for flying saucers as spaceships. There have been numerous reports from people who have seen spaceships and their extra-terrestrial crewmembers. Some claim even to have been aboard the ships. Have you investigated these reports? If not, do you dismiss them all out of hand as worthless? What justification do you have to do that?*

No, I have not investigated any of these reports. Not one.

My justification in dismissing them out of hand is that eye-witness evidence by a small number of people uncorroborated by any other sort of evidence is worthless. There is not a single mystical belief that is not supported by numerous cases of eye-witness evidence.

There is eye-witness evidence (as reported by enthusiasts) for angels, ghosts, spirits, levitation, were-wolves, precognition, fairies, sea-serpents, telepathy, abominable snowmen, and so on, and so on, and so on.

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I won't throw myself into the morass of believing all these things on eye-witness evidence alone; and if I don't, I won't believe flying saucer spaceships on eye-witness evidence alone either. I want something less prone to distortion, and less subject to deliberate hoaxing, than eye-witness evidence is.

I want something material and lasting, something that can be studied by many. I want an alloy not of Earth manufacture. I want a device that does something by no principle we understand. Best of all I want a ship and its crew in plain view, revealing itself to human beings competent to observe and study them over a reasonable period of time. These reported revelations to farmers in swamps and to automobile drivers on empty highways simply don't impress me. Nor am I impressed by descriptions of the ships and their interiors that are what I would expect from scientific illiterates who had seen some equally illiterate "science fiction" movies.

8) *But how else can you account for all the reports of flying saucers if you're going to rule out spaceships?*

There is the well-known Holmesian dictum that "Whenever you have eliminated all that is impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true." That is a great fraud, for it presupposes that after the elimination of the impossible, you are left with only *one* remaining factor. But how can you know that?

This misconception has arisen out of mathematics. In mathematics, we can so organize our definitions and axioms that we may be presented with a small number of factors and no more, with every one of that small number known. In that case if we eliminate all but one, the remaining one must be true (provided we show that it is not possible for none to be true).

This does not apply to the experimental or observational sciences, where the total number of factors may be indefinite and where not all may be known.

If flying saucers are spaceships, this must be proven by direct evidence. It can never be proven by wailing, "But what else can it be?"

9) *What do you think yourself that flying saucers are?*

My own feeling is that almost every sighting is either a mistake or a hoax. Many are so confused and incomplete there is no room to decide what they can possibly be.

I am told there are some reports (a small minority of the total) that seem to be neither mistakes nor hoaxes; that have been checked by reliable observers; and that cannot be explained in any ordinary way.

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10) *All right, stick to those puzzlers. What are they if they are not spaceships?*

I don't know. I don't have to know. The Universe is full of mysteries to which I don't have the answer. Challenging me and having me fail proves nothing.

Look, you may, perhaps, not know the name of the fifteenth president of the United States. If I say his name was Jerome Jameson, the fact that you don't know anything to the contrary doesn't prove my case.

But let us consider Joseph Allen Hynek, a respected American astronomer whom I know personally and who, I can testify, is an honest and an intelligent man of thorough scientific attainments.

Hynek is not ready to dismiss flying saucer reports out-of-hand as most astronomers do (and as I myself generally do). Rather he wants them examined carefully, and he is doing so himself. It is not an easy thing to do. These reports are so riddled with hoaxes, and the flying saucer enthusiasts have so many cranks, freaks, and nuts among them, that Hynek is constantly running the risk of innocently damaging his reputation by being confused with them. His interest in these strange reports, however, and his belief in their importance is enough to make him willing to accept the risk and I honor him for it.

Hynek does not believe that the reports deal with extraterrestrial spaceships. He does not have an explanation ready to hand for the reports. With him the subject of discussion is UFOs, Unidentified Flying Objects.

What Hynek says is that there is something there, something that cannot be explained within the conventional structure of science; and something, therefore, that should not be ridiculed and dismissed, but should be carefully and thoroughly studied.

He thinks that the manifestations that cannot be explained represent something so new to science that when solved it will lead to an enormous advance, a quantum leap, he says.

It's happened before. The puzzle of the negative result in the Michelson-Morley experiment led to the quantum jump of relativity. The paradoxes of black body radiation led to the quantum jump of the quantum theory itself. Therefore it may be that the UFO puzzle will lead to — what?

It's a fascinating thought. Almost, Hynek persuades me.

11) *Does Hynek have any theories about this at all? Where does he think science may be heading?*

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As far as I know, he's drawn a complete blank so far. He has spent a great deal of time in checking reports, in classifying them, and in seeking factors that various types of reports have in common, but when he's all through, he has a puzzle on his hands for which he has no answer.

12) *What makes it so difficult to find an answer to this problem?*

The scientific attack on the puzzles of the Universe works well when the system being studied is steadily available either for observation, or experimentation, or both. The planet Mars is usually available for telescopic study. A turtle heart is usually available for experimentation.

The scientific attack works well, too, when you can set up simple experiments, whose general tenor you understand. If you don't understand the underlying manner in which balls fall, you may nevertheless always set up any number of balls that fall under controlled conditions and study the results.

On the other hand, think of those relatively few UFO reports that are genuine puzzles, and that are not either mistakes or hoaxes. Those UFO phenomena appear unheralded, unexpected, and with the utmost irregularity in space and time. There is no way of layng a trap for them, short of setting up a world-wide monitoring system that would be fearfully expensive.

When a UFO phenomenon appears, it may not be witnessed at all; or it may be witnessed only in part by an individual or a few individuals who are caught by surprise and who may have no chance to make careful observations and no equipment to do it other than by eye. We end with an anecdotal half-memory of something half-seen.

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Furthermore, once a report of this sort is made, it is thoroughly discussed in the newspapers, and that means it is at once buried in innumerable similiar reports retailed by honest unsophisticates, by eager publicity-hounds, and by sick-minded hoaxers.

Under such conditions, it is not at all surprising that Hynek can't find a solution easily. I would not be surprised if neither Hynek nor anyone else could find a solution — ever!

And one last point. I am afraid that Hynek's feeling that the solution to the problem would lead science through a quantum-jump is just his *belief*. I don't blame him for his enthusiasm; I am myself riddled with various enthusiasms, but enthusiasm must be recognized for what it is and not mistaken for evidence.

I, myself, suspect (and it is just a suspicion) that if each puzzling UFO report were subject to thoroughgoing investigation, then the more that would be found out about it, the less puzzling it would seem. I believe that if all UFO reports were completely understood, all would turn out to be something that was part of our present structure of science or was, at most, an interesting but not very important amendment or extension of that structure. The solution of the UFO problem would add, I suspect, very little, or perhaps nothing at all, to science.

If I am wrong, and Hynek is right, I would be happy, for I like Hynek and I would be pleased to see science advance — but I can't make myself accept something just because it would please me to accept it. I have to accept only what seems to make sense to me.

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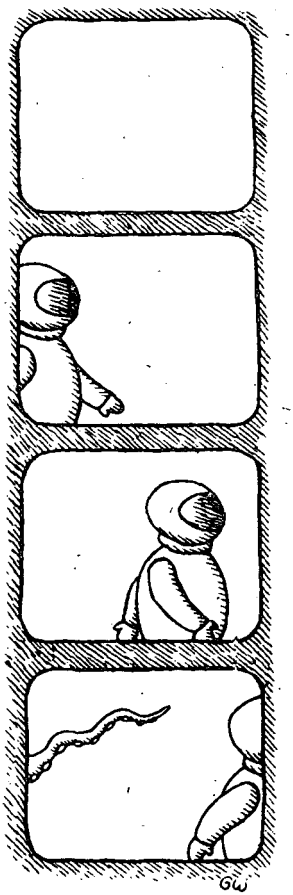
ROSEMARY'S CUCKOO

Though this will see print well toward the middle of the TV season, at this writing we have only just begun it; however I've seen enough to feel that this will *not* go down as the year another "Star Trek" is born.

The best tube-viewing of the month, in fact, was not the two series that concern this column, but a made-for-TV movie called *The Stranger Within*. Scripted by Richard Matheson from his own short story, "Mother By Protest," it was a very nice job indeed, managing to lead the viewer down the garden path of thinking that he was seeing yet another *Exorcist*-type exercise (perhaps overemphasized by a musical score that was just a little too reminiscent of that film's use of "Tubular Bells") and then sliding into a neat bit of science fiction. It also proved that you don't need a million-dollar budget for evocative s/f on the screen, just some intelligence, a good script and some savvy directing. I don't want to get too informative about it since if you missed it, there's always the inevitable rerun to look forward to; however, you can get the general idea from the title of this piece — that is, if you've read John Wyndham.

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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My one quibble is the unfortunate casting of Barbara Eden, who a decade ago used to come out of a bottle (or something) on TV as a genie. At this point looking permanently cast in plastic, she was not the ideal choice for the role of a pregnant woman being dominated by her unborn child.

Now for the series ... let me say right off the bat that the *form* of the TV series makes it almost impossible to create anything really satisfactory. By its very nature, a series cannot have a beginning, a middle, or an end (well, maybe a beginning, which they show you every week in case you missed the first episode); what intelligent viewer can be satisfied with a situation where the principal characters never change, grow, or develop, but just get involved in a series of incidents which can have only so much variety? "Star Trek" lucked out because they happened on a situation that lent itself to a greater variety of incidents than usual, but even there tedium set in eventually.

(As an alternative to the TV series form developed in this country, there is the British method of making serials — so far mostly adapted from literature — that *do* have a definite limit and do actually have a conclusion — infinitely more satisfactory.)

All of this leads me — reluctantly — to *Planet of the Apes*. In addition to the above mentioned problems, there is the fact that the films on which the series is based were inane to start off with. It's a one-joke idea and an old one at that — that simians are funny when dressed up and pretending to be human (or superior to humans, in this case). The joke ceased to be funny the first time around (in fact, I could be unkind and bring up Cheetah, J. Fred Muggs and "Me and the Chimp", but I won't) and the series continues to reproduce the ineptitudes of the films ("What planet are we on?" wonder the series' astronauts — or astronaughts, considering the acting — though just like Charlton Heston they've head nothing but English spoken since they got there).

Two words of faint praise ... the designs for the ape civilization are as handsome as they were in the first film, and Roddy McDowall, as the sympathetic ape, is doing a valiant job of synthesizing ape and human in his performance.

I admired *The Night Stalker and The Night Strangler* — made-for-TV films that did a dandy job of setting legendary horrors in very updated settings and featuring a wonderfully quirky reporter hero, Carl Kolchak, created by Darren

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McGavin. Kolchak, still impersonated by McGavin, has his own series now, titled *The Night Stalker;* every week he conveniently finds a new horror. So far it's been mildly amusing — a zombie from the recent flood of Haitian immigres, a still-surviving Jack the Ripper, an alien bone-marrow-sucker. But again ... the series problem. How long can he keep coming across these things (in Chicago, no less) before our disbelief unsuspends itself?

Things to come department... Hollywood's hottest scriptwriter, Robert Towne ("Chinatown"), is working on a script called "Lord Greystoke" which presumably will restore Tarzan to the original ERB characterization.

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Avram Davidson is of course a former editor of The Magazine; he sometimes lives in Canada and sometimes in Central America and has most recently been living very quietly in a mousehole on the Seacoast of Bohemia. For several years he has been working on the Matrix for the trinity of trilogies entitled *Vergil Magus* and has written little else. This last situation has happily changed, and we are pleased to present a brand-new story, the first of a series, about the strange investigations of Engelbert Esterhazy, Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Jurisprudence, Doctor of Literature, Doctor of Science . . .

Polly Charms, The Sleeping Woman

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

Visitors to the great city of Bella, capital of the Triune Monarchy of Pannonia-Scythia-Transbalkania, have many famous and memorable sights to see and will find many guides to show them. Assuming such a visitor to be so limited, unfortunately, in his time as to be able to see but three of these sights and assuming the guide to be of any experience at all, there are three which will, under any circumstance however hasty, be shown.

One, of course, is the great Private Park, and, of course, the greatest thing about the park is that it is no longer private: the first thing which the King-Emperor Ignats Louis having done, upon succeeding the reclusive Maximilian the Mad on the throne, being to throw open the Private Park to the public. The park is, of course, a marvel of landscape architecture, although this is perhaps caviare to the general. The general prefer to flock there to what is, after all, the largest merry-go-round in the world. And, next to that, the general prefer to stand and watch the vehicles on the New Model Road, which Ignats Louis, with great foresight, established for the exclusive use of what are now coming to be known as "motor-cars," in order, as the Presence sagely said, "In order that they may experiment without frightening the horses or be frightened by them." In a surprisingly brief period of time it became traditional for all owners of "motor-cars," between the hours of three and four in the afternoon, to make at least three complete circuits of the New Model Road. (The Order, that all such vehicles, whether propelled by

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steam, electricity, naphtha, or other means, be hauled to and from the Road by horse-power, is no longer enforced).

The second sight which it would certainly be impossible to leave Bella without having seen is the Italian Bridge. Although this is no longer the only bridge which crosses, at Bella, the blue and beautiful Ister, the gracious parabolas of its eleven arches are sure always to lift the heart; the legend that it was designed by Leonardo da Vinci remains unproven. But, of course, it is neither the architecture nor the legend which brings most visitors; it is the site, midway across, and marked by a marble placque (*From This Point On The Italian Bridge / The Pre-Triune Monarchial Poet / IZKO VARNA / Having Been Spurned By The Beautiful Dancer, Gretchelle / LEAPED TO HIS DOOM / Leaving Behind A Copy Of His Famously Heart-Rending Poem / FAREWELL, O BELLA / A Clever Play Upon Words Which Will Not / Escape The Learned*), usually accompanied by some floral tribute or other. The late well-known character, Frow Poppoff, for many years made a modest living by selling small bundles of posies to visitors for this very purpose; often, when trade was slow, the worthy Poppoff would recite Varna's famous poem, with gestures.

The third of the sights not to be missed is at Number 33, Turkling Street; one refers, of course, to The Spot Where The Turkling Faltered And Turned Back. (The well-known witicism, that the Turkling faltered and turned back because he could not get his horse past the push-carts, refers to an earlier period, when the street was an adjunct to the salt-fish, comb, and bobbin open-air street market. This has long since passed. Nor is it to be thought that the fiercest action of the Eleventh Turkish War took place under the bulging windows of Number 33, for the site at that time lay half a furlong beyond the old city wall. The "Turkling" in question was, of course, the infamous Murad the Unspeakable, also called Murad the Midget. It was certainly here that the Turkish tide turned back. According to the Ottoman Chronicle, "Crying, 'Accursed be those who add gods to God!' the valiant Prince Murad spurred on his charger, but, alas, fell therefrom and broke his pellucid neck...." The Glagolitic Annals insist that his actual words were, "Who ordered this stupid charge? He should be impaled!" — at which moment he himself was fatally pierced by the crossbow-bolt of one of the valiant Illyrian Mercenaries. But the point is perhaps no longer important.

A uniformed guard with a

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drawn sword paces up and down by the granite slab set level with the pavement which marks the place where Murad fell, and it is natural that visitors and passers-by take it for granted that the guard is a municipal functionary. Actually, he is not. A law passed during the Pacification of 1858 has limited private guards with drawn swords under the following terms: The employer of such a guard must have at least sixteen quarterings of nobility, not less than five registered degrees in the learned sciences, and a minimum of one hundred thousand ducats deposited in the Imperial Two Percent Gold Bond Funds.

In the entire Triune Monarchy of Pannonia - Scythia - Transbalkania, only one person has ever qualified under this law; and that one is, of course, the unquestionably great and justly famous Engelbert Eszterhazy, Doctor of Jurisprudence, Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Literature, Doctor of Science, *et sic cetera;* and the guard is his own private guard and patrols in front of his own private home, Number 33, Turkling Street.

One afternoon in the middle late autumn, a heavy-set man wearing the heavy grey suit and high-crowned grey derby hat which were almost the uniform of the plain-clothes division of the Municipal Police, approached the guard and raised his eyebrows. The guard responded by raising his sword in salute. The caller nodded, and, opening the door, entered Number 33. There was none of this petty-bourgeois business of knocking, or of doorbells. Inside the lower hall, the day-porter, Lemkotch, arose from his chair and bowed.

"Sir Inspector."

"Ask Dr. Eszterhazy if he can see me."

"My master is expecting the Sir Inspector. Please to go right up. I will tell housekeeper that she may bring the coffee."

The caller, who had expelled a slight sound of surprise at hearing the first sentence, displayed a slight smile at hearing the last. "Tell me, Lemkotch, does your master know absolutely everything?"

The stalwart, grizzle-haired servant paused a moment, said, casually, "Oh, yes, Sir Inspector. Everything." He bowed again and departed on his errand.

The caller trod heavily upon the runner of the stairway, of a dull ox-blood color which seemed to glow in the gaslight. It had been pieced together from a once-priceless Ispahani carpet which had suffered damages during the Great Fire of '93 and had been presented to him by an informal syndicate of

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the poorer Armenian merchants.

"This is for remembrance," the spokesman said.

And Eszterhazy's reply was, "It is better than rue."

He said now, "You are welcome, Commissioner Lobats. You are not, as you know, invariably welcome, because some times you bring zigs when I am engaged in zags. But this business of the young Englishwoman, Polly Charms, promises to be of at least mild interest.

Lobats blinked, gave a respectful glance at the signed cabinet photograph of the Presence in a silver frame, considered a few conversational openings, decided, finally, on a third.

"Your porter is well-trained in simple honesty," he said. "He greets me simply as 'Sir Inspector,' none of this 'High-born Officer,' with the slight sneer and the half-concealed leer which I get from the servants in some houses...I needn't say which. Everyone knows that my father is a butcher and that *his* father carried carcasses in the Ox Market."

Eszterhazy waved a dismissal of the matter. "All servants are snobs," he said. "Never mind. Remember what one of the Bonaparte's marshals said to that hang-over from the Old Regime who told him, 'You have no ancestors.' "Look at me,' he said; '*I* am an ancestor.'"

Lobats's heavy lips slowly and silently repeated the phrase. He nodded. Then he took a small notebook from his pocket and wrote it down. Then his head snapped up. "Say... Doctor. Explain how you knew that I was coming about this Polly Charms...." His eyes rested upon another framed picture, but this one he recognized as a caricature by the famous newspaper artist, Klunck: a figure preternaturally tall and thin, with a nose like a needle, and the brows bulging on either side like a house-frow's market-bag. And he wondered, almost bitterly, how Eszterhazy could refrain from rage at having seen it — much less, framing it and displaying it for all to see.

"Well, Karrol-Francos," Eszterhazy began, almost indulgently, "you see, I get my newspapers almost damp from the press. This means that the early afternoon edition of the *Intelligencer* got here at eleven o'clock. Naturally, one does not look for a learned summary of the significance of the new price of gold in the *Intelligencer*, nor for an editorial about the Bulgarian troop-movements. One does not read it to be enlightened, one reads it to be entertained. On hearing about this, this exhibition, shall we call it, upon the arrival of the *Intelligencer*,

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I turned at once to the half-page of *Tiny Topics*...you see...."

Lobats nodded. He, too, no matter what he had heard or had not heard, also turned at once to the half-page of *Tiny Topics*, so soon as he had the day's copy of the *Intelligencer* to hand. And, even though he had already turned to it once, and already read it twice, he not only turned to see it in the copy which Eszterhazy now spread out over his desk, he took out his magnifying glance. (Lobats was too shy to wear spectacles, coming of a social class which looked upon them as a sign of weakness, or of swank).

> *New Interesting Little Scientific Exhibit.* We found our curiosity well-repaid for having visited a little scientific exhibit at the old Goldbeaters Arcade where we saw the already famous Mis Polly Charms, the young Englishwoman who fell into a deep sleep over thirty years ago and has not since awakened. In fact, she slept entirely the raging cannot-shot of the Siege of Paris. The beautiful tragic Englishwoman, Mis Polly Charms, has not seemingly aged a day and in her condition of deep mesmerism she is said to be able to understand questions put to her by means of the principal of animal magnetism and to answer the questions put to her without waking up; also for a small sum in addition to the small price of admission she sings a deeply affecting song in French.

Lobats tapped the page with a thick and hairy finger. "I'll tell you, what, Doctor," he said, gravely. "I believe that this bit here, where is it, what rotten ink and type these cheap papers use nowadays, move my glass, ah, ah — oh, here it is, this bit where it says, *'In fact, she slept entirely the raging cannot-shot of the Siege of Paris,'* I believe that is what is called a misprint and that it ought to read instead, oh, something like this: *'In fact, she slept entirely* through *the raging cannot-shot of the Siege of Paris,'* or something like that. Eh?"

Eszterhazy looked up. His grey eyes sparkled. "Why, I believe that you are quite right, Karrol-Francos," he said. "I am proud of you."

Commissioner Lobats blushed, and he struggled with an embarrassed smile.

"So. Upon reading this, I looked to see the time, I calculated that the *Intelligencer* would reach you by twenty minutes after eleven, that you would have read the item

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by eleven-thirty, and that you would be here at ten minutes of twelve. — Do you think it is a case of abduction, then?"

Lobats shook his head. "Why should I try to fool *you?* You know as well as I do, better than I do, that I'm a fool for all sorts of circus acts, sideshows, mountebanks, scientific exhibitions, odd bits, funny animals, house-hauntings, and all such —"

Eszterhazy snapped his fingers, twice. In a moment his manservant was at his side with hat, coat, gloves, and walking-stick. No one else in the entire Triune Monarchy (or, for that matter, elsewhere) had for manservant one of the wild tribe of Mountain Tsiganes; no one else, in fact, would even have thought of it. How came those flashing eyes, that floating hair, that so-untamed countenance, that air of savage freedom, here and now to be silently holding out coat, hat, gloves and walking-stick? Who knows?

"Thank you, Herrekk," said Eszterhazy. Only he and Herrekk knew the answer.

"I will tell you, Commissioner," Eszterhazy said; *"so am I!"*

"Well, Doctor," the Commissioner said, *"I thought as much."*

Chuckling together, they went down the stairs.

At least one of the goldbeaters was still at work in the old Arcade, as a rhythmical thumping sound testified; but for the most part they had moved on to the New. Some of the former workshops were used as warehouses of sundry sorts: here was a fortune-teller, slightly disguised as a corsetiere; there was a corn-doctor, with two plaster casts in his window showing *Before* and *After*, with *Before* resembling the hoof of a gouty ogre, while *After* would have been worthy of a prima ballerina. And, finally, under a cheaply-painted and alredy-flaking wooden board reading *The Miniature Hall of Science*, was a sort of imitation theatre entrance. Where the posters would have been were bills in Gothic, Avar, Glagolitic (Slovatchko) Romanou, and even — despite the old proverb, "There are a hundred ways of wasting paint, and the first way is to paint a sign in Vlox" — Vlox. The percentage of literacy among the Vloxfolk may not have been high, but someone was taking no changes.

The someone was certainly not the down-at-heels fellow with a home-made crutch who, pointing the crutch at this last bill, enquired, "Do you know what you'd get if you crossed a pig with a Vloxfellow?" And, answering his own question, replied, "A dirty pig." And waited for the laugh.

"Be off with you," said Lobats, curtly. The loafer slunk away.

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There was even a bill in French.

POLLY CHARMS THE SLEEPING WOMAN ANSWERS QUESTIONS! MOST REMARKABLE!

SLEEPING BEAUTY OF 30 YEARS SLUMBER 30 ENGLISHWOMAN ! ! ! ! ! ! MOST UNUSUAL SIGHT!

DOES SHE ANSWER FROM THE WORLD OF THE LIVING OR THE DEAD????? COME! AND! SEE!!!

And so on. And so on.

The fat old woman at the ticket window, with dyed hair, and wearing the traditional red velveteen dress split under the arms, smiled fawningly at them.

"Permit," said Lobats, putting out his hand.

Nodding rapidly, she reached up to where a multitude of papers hung from a wire on clothes-pins, took one down, examined it, returned it, took another down, gave it a peep, nodded even more rapidly, and handed it out the window.

"Very well, Frow Grigou," said Lobats, handing it back. "Two tickets, please," putting coins in the counter.

Frow Grigou, instead of nodding her head, now began to shake it rapidly and pushed the money back, smiling archly. "Guests, the High-born Gentlemen, our guests, oh no no *Oh* no —"

Lobats turned as red as Frow Grigou's dress. "Tickets!" he growled. "Take the money. Take the —"

She took it this time, and hastily, extending the tickets, her head now rocking slowly from side to side, but still smiling archly, but now with an added puzzled note, as though the insistence on paying for admission were some odd bit of behavior which required the indulgence of the tolerant. "Always glad to see," she gobbled, her voice dying away behind them as they walked the short, dusty hall, "...High-born Gents....law-abiding ...delighted...."

Only one of the five or six functioning gas-jets inside the Exhibition Room had a mantle, and at least two of the others suffered a malfunction which caused them to bob up and down whenever a dray went by in the street: the light was therefore both inadequate and uncertain. And a soft voice now came from out of the dimness, saying, *"Billett? Billett?"*

Nature had formed the man who now came forward to look noble, but something else had reformed him to look furtive. His head was large, his features

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basically handsome, with long and white side-whiskers neatly trimmed so that not a hair straggled; but the head itself was completely hairless, with not even a fringe. The head was canted on one side, and the man looked at them out of the corner of one faded-blue eye as he took the tickets without glancing at them. Eszterhazy, almost as though automatically, and rather slowly, reached over and placed the tips of his fingers upon the man's head and ran them lightly over the surface...for just a moment....

Then he pulled them away, as if they had been burned.

"A phrenologist," the man murmured in English, and almost indulgently.

"Among other things," said Eszterhazy, also in English.

A horrid change came over the man's face, his haggard and quasi-noble features dissolved into a flux of tics and grimaces. Once or twice his mouth opened and closed. Then, "*Come right in, gentlemen, the exhibition will commence almost any moment now.*" he said, unevenly, in a mixture of terrible French and broken German. And, "*...one of the most remarkable phenomena of the age,*" he whispered: again, in English. Then he seemed to fall in upon himself, his head bowed down, his shoulders hunched, and he turned away from them in a curious twisting motion.

Lobats turned, with a quizzical look, to Eszterhazy; observed with astonishment and concern that his companion's face was — even in that dim and fitful light — gone pale and drawn, jaw thrust outward and downward in a grimace which might have been — had it been someone else, anyone else — fright —

But, in a moment, face and man were the same as before, save that the man had swiftly taken out a silken pocket-handkerchief and wiped face and as swiftly returned it. And before Lobats had time to say one word, a thin and almost eeerie sound announced a gramophone had added its note "scientific" to the atmosphere. It took a few seconds, during which a group of newcomers, evidently mostly clerks and such who were taking advantage of their luncheon-time, entered the room — it took a few seconds for one to recognize, over the sudden clatter and chatter, that the gramophone was offering a song in French. Strange and curious were the words, and curious and strange the voice.

Curieux scrutateur de la nature entière,
J'ay connu due grant tout le principe et la fin.
J'ay vu l'or en puissance au fond de sa minière,
J'ay saisi sa matière et surpris son levain.

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Few of those present, clearly, understood the words, yet all were, somehow, moved. Obscure the burden, the message unclear; the voice seemed moreover odd, unearthly, and grotesque through the transposition of the primitive machine: yet the effect was as beautiful as it was uncanny.

J'expliquay par quel art
l'âme aux flancs d'une mère,
Fait sa maison, l'emporte, et comment un pépin
Mis contre un grain de blé, sous l'humide poussière,
l'un plante et l'autre cep, sont le pain et le vin.

Lobats dug his companion in the ribs, gently, and, in an hoarse whisper, asked, "What is it?"

"It is one of the occult, or alchemical, sonnets of the Count of St.-Germain...if he was...who lived at least two hundred years...if he did," Eszterhazy said, low-voiced.

Once more the voice — high and clear as that of a child, strong as that of a man — took up the refrain.

"Rien n'était, Dieu voulut,
rien devint quelque chose,
J'en doutais, je cherchay sur
quoi l'univers pose,
Rien gardait l'équilibre et
servait de soutien.

The Commissioner uttered an exclamation. "Now I know! I remember hearing — it was years ago — that Italian singer —"

"— Yes —"

"He was a, a, a whatchamay-callit....one of *them* —"

"A castrato. Yes...."

Once more, and for the last time, the voice, between that of men and women, soared up, magnificent despite all distortion, from the great, curling cornucopia of the gramophone horn.

"Enfin, avec le poids de
l'éloge et du blâme,
Je pesay l'éternel, il appela
mon âme,
Je mourus, j'adoray, je ne
savais plus rien...."

The moment's silence which followed the end of the song was broken by another, and more earthly voice, and one well-enough known to both Eszterhazy and to Lobats. It was that of one Dougherty, a supposed political exile of many years' residence in Bella. From time to time one came upon him in unfashionable coffee-houses, or establishments where stronger drink was served. Sometimes the man was writing something, and sometimes he explained that it was part of a book which he was writing, and sometimes he explained nothing,

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but scrawled slowly away in a dreamy fashion. At other times he had no paper in front of him, only a glass, into or beyond which he stared slackly. This man Dougherty was tall and he was stooped and he wore thick eyeglasses and now and then he silently moved his lips — lips surprisingly fresh and full in that ruined grey countenance. Officially he described himself as "Translator, Interpretor, and Guide," and he was evidently acting now in the first and second of these capacities.

"Gentlemen," he began (and he used the English word): "Gentlemen...Mr. Murgatroyd, the entrepreneur of this scientific exhibition, has asked me to thank those of you who have honored him with your patronage and to express his regret that he does not speak with fluency the languages of the Triune Monarchy, whose warm and frequent hospitality...." Here he paused, and seemed to sag a bit, as though bowed beneath the weight of all the nonsense and persiflage which convention required him to be saying — and which he had been saying, in one way or another, over and over, for decades. Indeed, he frankly sighed, put his hand to his forehead; then he straightened and took in his hand something which the entrepreneur had given: it seemed to be a pamphlet, or booklet.

"Mmmm... Yes.... Some interesting facts, taken from a voluminous work written on the subject of the mysterious sleeping woman, Polly Charms, by a member of the French Academy and the Sorbonne. The subject of this scientific exhibition, the ever-young Englishwoman, Miss Mary Charms, called Polly, was born in —"

His remarks, which had sunk to a monotone, were interrupted now by several exclamations of annoyance, amidst which one voice now made itself heard, and distinctly: "Come on, now, dear sir ["Lieber herar" — sarcastically], save all this muckdirt ["scheiss-dreka"] for those there *gentlemen* [very sarcastically] who've got the whole afternoon at their leisure; come on, let's see —"

Lobats coughed sufficiently to draw attention. The voice hesitated, then went on, though in tones somewhat less rough and menacing, to say that They were workingpeople, didn't have much time, had payed to see this here Miss Sharms, and wanted to see her or their money back, so, "Save the French Sorbonne for the desert course, for them as can wait, and let's get on with it."

Dougherty shrugged, leaned over and spoke to Murgatroyd, who also shrugged, then gestured to Frow Grigou, who did not bother to

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shrug, but, indicating by a flurry of nods and smirks that she was only too happy to oblige and merely wondered that anyone should think otherwise, trotted swiftly to the side of the room, and pulled at a semi-visible cord. The filthy old curtain, bearing the just-visible name of a firm of patent-medicine makers long bankrupt, began — with a series of jerks and starts in keeping with the hiccuppy-gas-lights — to go up.

And Mr. Murgatroyd, not even waiting for the process to be complete, moved forward and, with a smack of his lips, began to speak, and to speak in English, and went on speaking, leaving it to Dougherty to catch up, or not, with the translation and interpretation.

"It was just thirty years ago, my lords and ladies and gentlemen, just exactly thirty years ago to this very day —" But his glib patter, obviously long and often repeated, plus the fact of the term *30 Years* appearing in faded letters on several of the bills posted outside, made it at once obvious that the "thirty years" was a phrase by now ritualized and symbolic. Perhaps he, or perhaps another, had endowed Polly Charms with thirty years' slumber at the very beginning of the show's career; or, perhaps, and the thought made one shudder, Murgatroyd had been saying "30 years" for far longer than any period of only thirty years. "— that young Miss Mary Charms, called Polly, at the age of fifteen years, accompanied by her mother and several other loved ones..."

He trailed off into silence, having been pushed aside by several of those honoring him with their patronage as they shoved up to see; in the silence, Dougherty proceeded with his translations ...which may or may not have been listened to by any.

Eszterhazy realized that he had been expecting, for some reason, to see either a coffin or something very much like it. What he actually saw was something resembling an infant's crib, though of course much larger; and, at very first glimpse, it seemed to be filled with a mass of —

"...of Professor Leopold de Entwhistle, the noted mesmerologist," Murgatroyd's voice suddenly was heard again, after the first burst of exclamations had subsided. His eyes shifted, met Eszterhazy's. The Englishman's eyes at once closed, opened, closed, opened, and, as it were desperately, looked away. Where Eszterhazy looked was into the crib: and what he saw it was almost filled with was, or seemed to be, hair....long and lustrous golden-brown hair. Coils and braids of it. Immense tresses of it. Masses and masses of it. Here and there ribbons had been affixed

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to it. And still it went on.

And almost buried in it, slightly raised by a pillow at the head of the crib was another head, a human head, the head of, and indeed of, a female in early womanhood.

"Can we touch it — uh, *her?*" someone asked.

Murgatroyd muttered.

"One at a time, and gently," said Dougherty. "Gently...*gently!*"

Fingers were applied, some hesitantly. A palm was applied to the side of the face. Another was raised and moving down, though not, by the looks of it, or by its owner's looks, to the face: at this point Lobats grunted and grabbed the man's wrist. Not gently. The man growled that he was just going to — but the disclaimer fell off into a snarl, and the gesture was not repeated. Someone managed to find a hand, and lifted it up, with a triumphant air, as though no one had ever seen a hand before.

And Eszterhazy now said, "All right. *Enough....*" He moved up, the crowd moved back. He took out his stethoscope. The crowd said *Ahhh.*

"That's the philosopher," someone said to someone else. Who said, *"Oh*yes" — although what quality either one attached to the term, perhaps neither understood precisely.

God only knew where the girl's garment had been made, or when, or by whom; indeed, it seemed to have been made-over several times and to consist of sundry strata, so to speak. Now and again it had occurred to Whomever that the girl was supposed to be sleeping, and so th semblance of a nightgown had been fashioned. Several times. And on several other occasions the theatrical element of it all had overcome, and attempts made to provide the sort of dress which a *chansonette* might have been wearing...wearing, that is, in some provincial music-hall where the dressmakers had odd and old-fashioned ideas of what a *chansonette* might like to wear...and the *chansonettes,* for that matter, even odder ones.

There was silk and there was cotton and there was muslin, lace, artificial flowers, rutches, embroidered gores, gussets, embroidered yokes —

The girl's eyes were almost entirely closed. One lid was just barely raised, and a thin line gleamed, at a certain angle, underneath. Sleepers of that age do not flush, always, as children often do, in sleep. There was color in the face, though not much. The lips were the tint of a pink. A small gold ring showed in one ear, the other was concealed by the hair.

"The hair," said Murgatroyd, *"the hair has never stopped growing!"* A kind of delight seemed

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to seize him as he said it.

Eszterhazy's look brought silence. And another flurry of tics. Several times he moved the stethoscope. Then the silence was broken. "A wax doll, isn't it, Professor? Isn't —"

Eszterhazy shook his head. "The heartbeat is perceptible," he said. "Though very, very faint." The crowd sighed. He removed the ear-pieces, passed the instrument to Commissioner Lobats. Who, looking immensely proud, and twice as important, attached himself to it — not without difficulty. After some moments he — very slowly — nodded twice. The crowd sighed again.

"Questions? Has anyone a question to ask of Polly Charms, the Sleeping Woman — ah, one moment, please. It is time for her daily nourishment." Murgatroyd, with a practiced flourish, produced two bottles, a glass, and a very tarnished, very battered, but unquestionably silver, spoon. "All attempts to make the mysterious and lovely Miss Mary partake of solid sustenance have failed. Nor will her system accept even gruel. Accordingly, and on the advice of her physicians — of the foremost physicians in Christendom —" Here he turned and beckoned to a member of the audience, an elderly dandy, audibly recognized by several as a ribbon-clerk in a nearby retail emporium. "I should like to ask of you the favor, sir, to taste and smell of this and to give us your honest and unbought opinion as to its nature."

The man simpered, sniffed, sipped. Smacked his lips. "Ah. Why that's Tokai. Bull's-blood Tokai." And he made as though to take more. Laughs and guffaws and jests. — The contents of the other bottle were declared to be water. The girl's manager then ceremonially mixed the glass half-full of wine and half of water. He might have been an alchemist, proving an elixir. "Come on, now, come on. — Questions?"

Snickers, jokes, people being pushed forward, people holding back. Then the ribbon-clerk, glancing at his watch, a-dangle and a-bangle with fobs and seals, said, "Very well. One question and then I must go. Gracious Lady: Who is Frantchek? And where?"

Murgatroyd held the spoon to her lips and raised her head a trifle. "Just a spoonful, Polly. To please Father Murgatroyd." The slick and hairless head bent over her, indeed like that of a father cosseting an ill child. Slowly the lips parted. The spoon clinked against the even row of teeth. Withdrew.

"*Very* well, Polly. You're a *good* girl. Father Murgatroyd is very *pleased* with you. And now, if you

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please, an answer to the question. 'Who is Frantchek? And where?'"

The lips parted once again. A faint, a very faint sigh was heard. And then, in the voice of a girl in her middle teens imitating one much younger, in tones artificial and stilted, Polly Charms spoke.

"Why, Brother, I am in America. With Uncle."

All turned to the old dandy, who had been standing, one hand on hip, with an expression of one who expects to be fooled. But who won't be, even if he is. Because of expecting it. This expression fell quite away. He gaped.

"Well, Maurits? And what about that?" — they pressed him.

"Why — why — why Frantchek *is* my brother. He run off, oh, five-and-twenty year ago. We none of us had a word of him —"

"And the uncle? In America?"

Old Maurits slowly nodded, dumfounded. "I *did* have an uncle, in America. Maybe still do. *I* don't know —" With a jerk away from the hand on his shoulder, he stumbled out, face in his hands.

Comment was uncertain. One said, "Well, *that* didn't really prove nothing... *still*...."

And another one — probably the same who had demanded the biographical details be omitted, now said, loudly, "Well, Miss, *I* think you're a fake, a clever fake. Wha-at? Why, half the people in the Empire have a brother named Frantchek, and an uncle in America! Now, just you answer *this* question. What's this in my own closed hand, here in this coat-pocket?"

Another spoonful of wine and water.

Another expectant silence, this time with the questioner openly sneering.

Another answer.

"The pearl-handled knife which you stole at the bath-house...."

And now see the fellow, fact mottled, furious, starting towards the sleeping woman, hand moving up and out of the pocket. And see Lobats lunge, hear a sudden and sick cry of pain. See a something fall to the ground. And watch, the man, now suddenly pale, as Lobats says, "Get out! Or —! — watch him get...holding one hand with the other. And see the others stoop and gape.

"A pearl-handled knife!"

"Jesus, Mary, and —"

"— known him for years, he ain't no good —"

And now someone, first clutching his head in his hands, and then leaning forward, then drawing back and staring, glaring all round, face twisted with half shame and half defiance: "Listen... listen... Say — I want to *know*. Is my wife...is she all that she should be — to me — *is she* —" He doesn't finish, nobody

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dares to laugh. They can hear his breath, through distended nostrils.

Another spoonful. Another pause.

"Better than she should be... though little you deserve it...."

The man will not face anyone. He leans to one side, head bent, breathing very heavily.

And soon the last question has been asked, and the wine is all gone. —Or, perhaps, it is the other way around.

And, as Murgatroyd goes to put down the spoon, and the audience is suddenly uncertain, suddenly everyone looks at someone whom nobody has looked at before. Who says, "And, so, Professors, what about the French song?" A spruce, elderly gent, shiny red cheeks, garments cut in the fifth year of the Reign, looking for all the world like a minor notary from one of the remoter suburbs ("Ten tramways and a fiacre-ride away," as the saying goes) where each family still has its own cow, and probably up to the center of the city for his annual trip to have his licensure renewed; wanting a bit of fun along with it, and, not daring to tell the old lady ("Tanta Minna," probably) that he has had it at any place more daring, has been having it as a "scientific exhibition."

"Wasn't there supposed to be a French song?" he asks, calmly.

Murgatroyd, at a murmur from Dougherty, produces a wooden tray lined with worn green velveteen, and covertly places in it a single silver half-ducat, which he watches rather anxiously. "For a very slight additional charge," he says, starting the rounds, "a beautiful song in the French language will be sung by the lovely and mysterious young Polly Charms, the —"

Spectators show signs of departing... or, at any rate, of drawing away from the collection-tray. A single piece of gold spins through the air, all a-glitter, falls right upon the half-ducat with a pure ringing sound. Mr. Murgatroyd looks up, almost wildly, sees Eszterhazy looking at him. Who says, "Get on with it."

Murgatroyd makes the money vanish. He leans over the sleeping woman, takes up her right hand, slowly caresses it. "Will you sing us a song, Polly dear?" he asks. Almost, one might think, anxiously.

"That sweet French song taught you by Madame, in the old days...eh?" And, no song being forthcoming, he clears his throat, and, quaveringly, begins:

"Je vous envoye un bouquet... eh, Polly?"

Eszterhazy, watching, sees a slight tremor in the pale, pale throat. A slight rise in the slight bosom, covered in its bedizened robe. The mouth opens. An indrawn breath is clearly heard.

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And then she sings. Polly Charms, the Sleeping Lady, sings.

"Je vous envoye un bouquet
que ma main
Vient de trier de ces fleurs
epanies:
Qui ne les eust à ce vespre
cuiellies,
Cheutes à terre elles fussent
demain."

No one had asked Dougherty to translate the previous French songs, sung by the eunuch singer (surely one of the very last) on the gramophone; nor had he done so, nor did anyone ask him to translate now; yet, and without his grey face changing at all, his grey lips motioned, and he began: "'I send you now a sheaf of fairest flowers / Which my hand picked; yet are they so full blown, / Had no one plucked them they had died alone, / Fallen to earth before tomorrow's hours.'"*

Still, Murgatroyd caressed the pallid hand. And, again, the eerie and infantile voice sang out.

"Cela vous soit un example
certain
Que vos beautez, bien
qu'elles solent fleuries,
En peu de temps cherront
toutes fletries,
Et comme fleurs periront
tout soudain."

"'Then let this be a portent in your bowers,'" Dougherty went on. "'Though all your beauteous loveliness is grown, / In a brief while it falls to earth o'erthrown, / Like withered blossoms, stripped of all their powers....'"

Quietness.

A dray rumbles by in the street. The gaslights bob up and down. Breaths are let out, throats cleared. Feet shuffle.

"Well, now," says old Uncle Oskar, "that was very nice, I am sure." Smiling benignly, he walks over, and, into the now-empty collection plate, he drops a large old five-coppers piece. Nodding and beaming, he departs. It has been worth every *copperka* of it to him, the entire performance. Tonight, over the potato dumplings with sour-crout and garlic wurst, he will tell Tanta Minna all about it. In fact, if he is alive and she is alive, ten years from now, he will still be telling about it: and she, Tanta Minna, will still be as astonished as ever, punctuating each pause with *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!* or, alternately, *Oh, thou dear Cross!*

Some follow after him, some still remain.

"The performance is over," says Eszterhazy.

Lobats: "*Over.* Good afternoon to you."

**From Ronsard's* Lyrics, *tr. by William Sirling, pub. by Allan Wingate, no date, no place of publication indicated.*

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And Frow Grigou calls after him, anxious as ever, "There is another performance at half-past five, Dear Sirs, and also at eight and at ten!"

Lobats looks at Eszterhazy, as though to say, what now? And Eszterhazy looks at Murgatroyd. "I am a Doctor of Medicine and a Titular Court Physician," he said, "and I should like your permission to make an examination of —" he gestures. (Dougherty, without looking anywhere in particular, at once begins to translate Eszterhazy's English into Avar, then slowly seems to feel that this is, perhaps, not exactly what is wanted at the moment, and his voice dies away.

Murgatroyd licks his lips, the lower parts of his mustache. Almost, he licks the tip of his nose. "Oh, no," he says. "Oh, no..."

"And this," Eszterhazy says, calmly, "is a Commissioner of Police."

Murgatroyd looks at the Commissioner of Police, who looks back; he looks at Dougherty, who looks away; then he looks for Frow Grigou.

But Frow Grigou has gone, quite gone.

Excerpts from the *Day-Book* of Dr. Eszterhazy: *"...Query Reuters for the precise date of the death by apoplexy of ENTWHISTLE, LEOPOLD (see Private Encyclopedia), British mesmerist and mountebank, supposedly in the midst of an exhibition or performance....*

"...no signs of any callosities whatever on the soles of the feet, or heels...degeneration of the muscular tissue, such as is found among the long-senile, was not present, however....

"Murgatroyd declared, though reluctantly, that passage of waste materials was infrequent, and cleanly....

"Murgatroyd was almost violent in his reaction to the tentative suggestion of Lobats that an attempt, by mesmerism, to bring the young woman out of this supposed-mesmeric trance, be attempted. MEMO: To re-read story by American writer E. A. Poe, The Case of Monsieur M. Waldemar. *In this tale, a presumed account of facts, a dying man is placed under mesmeric trance of long duration (exact duration not recalled); removal of trance state or condition discloses that 'Waldemar' has actually been dead, body at once lapsing into decay. Cannot state at present if the story is entirely fictitious or not; another story by same writer* (Marie Roget?) *known to be demi-factual.*

"Obvious: *welfare of young woman is first consideration.*

"Suggestion: *Consider question of use of galvanic batteries, but only if —"*

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For some seconds the sound of running feet had echoed in the narrow street below. A voice, hoarse and labored — Then the night-porter, Emmerman, entered. He was always brief. "Goldbeaters' Arcade on fire, Master," he said now. Adding, as Eszterhazy, with an exclamation, ran for his medical-bag, "Commissioner Lobats has sent word." The Tsigane had appeared, as though rising from out of the floor (where, indeed, on the threshold of his master's bedroom door, he always slept); but Eszterhazy, waving aside the coat and hat, said two words: "*The steam* —" He followed the silently-running Herrekk through the apartment and down the back steps to the mews, where the two-man runabout was kept, and they leaped on it. Schwebel, the retired railroad engineer who maintained the machine, had been charged to see that a head of steam was always kept up, and he had never failed. With a sketch of a salute, he threw open the stable door. With a low hiss, the machine, Eszterhazy at the tiller, rolled out into the night. Herrekk had already begun to toll the great bronze hand-bell to warn all passers-by out of the way.

Lobats had said that he was "a fool for all sorts of circus acts, sideshows, mountebanks, scientific exhibitions, odd bits, funny animals, house-hauntings...." He might have added: "And fires."

Three fire-engines of the newest sort, each drawn troika-fashion by three great horses of matching colors had come, one after another to The Street of the Defeat of Bonaparte (universally called Bonaparte Street), as near as they could maneuver, and made much ado with hoses into the Arcade. But the watchman of the neighborhood, many of whom had been employed there before the modern fire department came into being, had set up their bucket-brigade, and were still toiling the old but functioning leather containers from hand to hand. A sudden breeze now whipped up the flames and sparks and sent them flying overhead, straight up and aloft into the black sky — and, at the same time, clearing the passage-way of the Arcade from all but the smell of smoke.

Off in a corner, her red velveteen dress flying loose about her fat body, Frow Grigou crouched, hands to mouth, mouth which screamed incessantly: "Ruined! Ruined! The curtains, the bad gas-jets! The bad gas-jets, the curtains! Ruined! Ruined! Ruined!"

All at once the fire-hoses heaved, writhed, gushed forth in a potent flow. The smoke turned black, clouds of steam arose.

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Eszterhazy felt himself choking, felt himself being carried away in the powerful arms of Herrekk, the Mountain Tsigane. In a moment he cried, "I am all right! Set me down —" Saw himself looking into the anxious face of Lobats. Who, seeing Eszterhazy on his feet and evidently recovered, gestured silently to two bodies on the pavement in Bonaparte Street.

Murgatroyd. And Polly Charms.

(Later, Lobats was to ask: "What was it that you found out when you put your fingers on the Englishman's head?" And Eszterhazy was to answer: "More than I will ever speak of to anyone.")

Eszterhazy flung himself down beside them. But although he cursed aloud the absence of his galvanic batteries and though he plied all the means at his behalf — the cordials, the injections, the ammoniated salts — he could bring no breath nor motion to either of them.

Slowly, Lobats crossed himself. Ponderously, he said, "Ah, they're both in a better world now. She, poor little thing, her life, if you can call that long sleep a life — And he, bad chap though I must suppose he must've been in lots of ways, maybe in most — but surely he expiated his sins in dragging her almost to safety, trying to save her life at the risk of his own when her very hair was on fire —"

And indeed, most of that incredible mass of hair had burned away: those massive tresses which Murgatroyd (for who else? must have daily and nightly spent hours in brushing and combing and plaiting and braiding...one must hope, at least lovingly...that incredible profusion of light-brown hair, unbound for the night, had indeed burned away but for a light scantling, like that of a crop-headed boy. And this now shown in the dim and flaring lights all a-glitter with moisture, shining with the drops of the water which had extinguished its fire. The girl's face was as calm now as ever. The lips of the color of a pink were again so slightly parted. But whatever she might once have had to tell, would now forever be unknown.

And as for Murgatroyd, Death had at least and at last released him from all need of concealment and fear. The furtive look was quite gone now. The face seemed now entirely noble.

"— I suppose you might say that he'd exploited her, kept her in that state of bondage — But at least he risked his life to save hers —"

One of the watchmen now stepped forward and respectfully gestured a salute. "Beg the Sir High Police. Commissioner a pardon," he said now. "However,

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as it is not so."

"What is not so?" — Lobats, annoyed.

The watchman, still respectful, but quite firm: "Why, as the poor gentleman tried, dying, to save the poor missy. But it wasn't so, Sir High Commissioner and Professor Doctor. It was as one might say the opposite way. 'Twas *she* as was trying to get *him* out. *Oh*yes, Sirs. We heard of him screaming, oh Jesus Mary and Joseph, how he screamed! We couldn't get into them. We looks around and we looks back and there she come, she come out of the flames, sometimes carrying him and sometimes she dragged at him and then her pretty hair went all a-blaze and they two fell almost at our very feet and we doused them with water...y'see," he concluded, his eloquence exhausted.

"Ah, stop your damned lies, man!" — Lobats.

Eszterhazy, shaking his head, murmuring: "See, then, how swiftly the process of myth-making and legendry begins....*Oh! God!*"

Shocked, speechless, he responded to Lobats only with a gesture. Still on his knees, Eszterhazy pointed wordlessly to the feet of Polly Charms, the Sleeping Woman. The feet were small and slight. They were, as always, naked, bare. And Lobats, following the silent gesture, saw with a shock that even experience had not prepared him for, that the bare feet of the dead girl were deeply scratched, and torn, and red with blood.

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 9

In our September issue we asked competitors to submit descriptions of specialized courses that might be offered within a mythical college department in science fiction. A fine response, with a varied collection of absurd and unlikely courses. The winners:

FIRST PRIZE:

ALIEN LANGUAGES 103: CONVERSATION: Professor Mrxtne. Socially-significant discourse will be held in the following alien tongues: the incommunicably subtle sign language of the Second Foundation; Ellison's mouthless screams; the thumping of the Dune sandworms; the highly-evolved, ultra-sophisticated intergalactic language of Star Trek's Federation; Monolithanian from 2001 (double chorus dialect); grotesque songs of the Hobbit; and Esperanto. Students must supply their own thumpers. Prerequisite: Alien Languages 102, "Syntax and Oral Orifices."

—Dan Mattern

SECOND PRIZE:

ADVANCED VETERINARY MACROBIOLOGY: By use of Big State's multifunded electron macroscope the student will attempt to produce large flying fowl and armed retilian morents as well as smaller guard watch wehrs. Each student will be issued one black turkey, one chameleon and one iguana in the first semester and a helmet and chainmail in the second. Course is supported by a grant from Ralston-Purina and a contract with the Federal Aviation Administration.

—Nadya K. Bleisch

RUNNERS-UP:

INTRODUCTORY SPACEFLIGHT (Professor Verne): A study of projectile ballistics. Includes chosing the correct gunpowder. Students will be required to cast a small howitzer.

ALTERNATE MODES OF CONSCIOUSNESS (Professor Dick): Probes non-Linear thinking, with emphasis on paranoia and schizophrenia. Prerequisite: one nervous breakdown or three acid trips. Required reading: Malzberg.

—Greg Hartmann

TIME TRAVEL I: Introduction to then and now. Course will include actual time travel. Students traveling to a time after the end of the course will have already completed the course and thus do not have to take it. Students may take Time Travel II first, return in time to Time Travel I, then travel forward to the end of Time Travel

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II, thus taking both courses without taking either.

—*Kenneth P. Service*

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE DEAD Prof. Bailey: Students will investigate the mental and neuralogical processes involved in the limbo mentality. Post-mortem states of mind will be induced through the use of sixteen texts, all of which are decade-old Ace Doubles. As a final examination, each student will be required to bury him or hereself, simulate biodegredation, and think obsessively about the lens of succubus.

EXPERIENTIAL AUSTISM: Understanding the Characters of Philip K. Dick Prof Eldritch: Students will be required to lose their lovers, be cheated out of their money, give up all hope, and fail in all their endeavors. Suicide is encouraged, although attempts should fail miserably. In an effort to further the student's progress, each member of the class will be flunked, and the following day the college will close after a depressing scandal. The professor in the tenth week will turn out to be a malfunctioning android.

—*Scott Edelstein*

TIME TRAVEL 201. Prof. Chronosky: Open to all survivors of T.T. 101. Further exploration into the past. Guest lectures by H.G. Wells. Field trip to early Pleistocene (Note: Facilities have improved somewhat and due precautions will be taken to avoid unfortunate mishaps encountered on last semester's trip). Credit 10 hours. Prerequisities; Demonstrated fighting ability with clubs and stones.

SF 332. CYBORGOLOGY. Prof. Metallo: Study of anatomy, morphology, physiology, psychology, sex life, and electronic circuitry of cyborgs. Required lab in two sections. First term: dissection of cyborg frog, shark, & cat. Student with lowest midterm grade will be converted to a cyborg as the second term lab project. Credit 5 hours. Prerequisites: Comparative Anatomy, Cybernetics, Computer Programming (Note: All registered students must be consenting adults prepared for a change in life.).

—*Alice Simmons*

LUCIAN AND ELLISON, A comparative Study: The science fiction works of Lucian of Samosata and Harlan Ellison are analyzed and viewed in perspective together. Required reading: TRUE HISTORY, by Lucian of Samosata; "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," by Harlan Ellison; "'Repent, Hoplite!' said the Oracle of Delphi," by Lucian of Samosata and Harlan Ellison.

—*Steven Utley*

BASIC SPINDIZZY CONSTRUCTION: Graduate level survey course in which students will construct and operate a spindizzy capable of removing Cleveland,

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Ohio to the Crab Nebula, which will constitute final exam. Note: Course will cover several years. Consent of instructor and next-of-kin required.

R'lyeh 605 — CTHULHU TEXTS: Wg'hnagl hth'garn ph'nargl: gr'lny Cr'nart ha'ptor h'rncir phl'gmar.

—*Scott Cupp*

Competition 10

Unlikely doubles: Most readers are familiar with the Ace Doubles, sf paperback books that offer two titles under one cover. For competition 10, send us up to a dozen humorous or unfortunate combinations of any two SF works, eg:

Billion Year Spree/Drunkard's Walk
Frankenstein Unbound/The Destruction of the Temple
Can you Feel Anything When I Do This/I, Robot

We'll consider triples also.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by February 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 10 will appear in the June issue.

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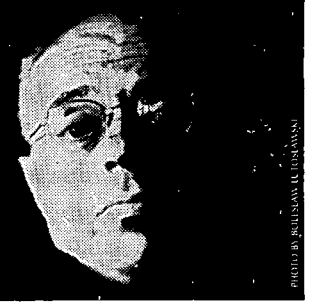

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